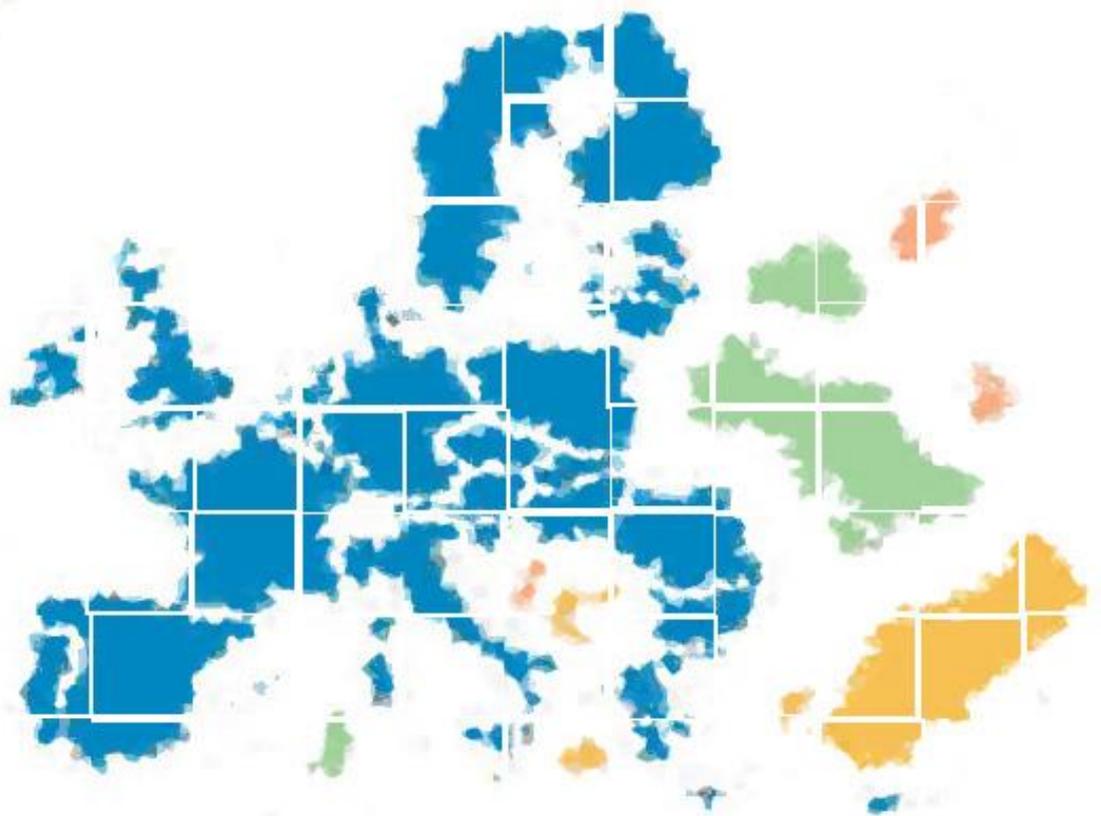


EU Frontiers

Student Paper Series

Does Eastern Partnership Stand a Chance at Visegrad's Glory?

Mihai Popșoi



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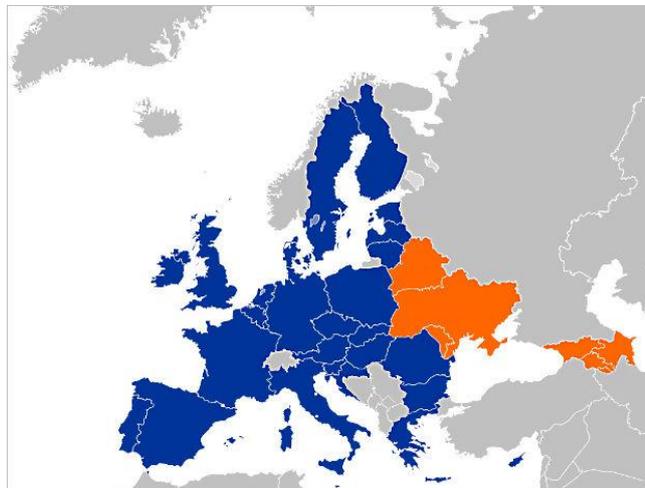
Executive Summary

The paper scrutinizes the potential of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) to become a success story in terms of building a common regional identity. It provides a brief historic account of the EaP through the concept of Europeanization. It then looks at differences and similarities between the EaP and the Visegrad Group, while also questioning the current willingness and capacity of the European Union to effectively customize its relations with the EaP members. As the EaP has had a rather mixed record, the paper focuses on its front runners Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, advocating a two tier approach to the EaP. It also gives an account of the main internal and external challenges facing the EaP countries in their quest to joining the EU. Russia's regional ambitions and how they play out with regards to the EaP is viewed through the prism of regional competition between the European and the Eurasian Unions. Finally, looking at the EaP through the lenses the Visegrad Group experience raises a series of non-trivial questions about the nature of current EaP cooperation. It also presents a sobering outlook on the Partnership's future.

Does Eastern Partnership Stand a Chance at Visegrad's Glory?

Officially inaugurated in May 2009, the Eastern Partnership embodies a more targeted European Union approach towards the European Neighborhood Policy, which in turn is largely a “product” of the ‘big bang enlargement.’ Having considerably expanded to the east, the EU was faced with a completely new reality of the neighboring post-Soviet states and current, albeit at times reluctant, members of the Russia-driven Commonwealth of Independent States. It, therefore, became imperative for the EU to expand its political and economic ties with countries like Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, in the hope of creating a more prosperous and stable environment while at the same time boosting the EU's standing as a foreign policy actor.

However, the EaP was envisaged by its biggest promoters, Poland and Sweden, not just as a framework for deeper cooperation, but also as a pathway towards eventual EU integration, despite offering no formal membership perspective. This idea was not equally welcome by all EaP countries. Some were more eager than others. From early on, Belarus and Azerbaijan were clear outliers, joined later on by Armenia, whereas Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have surged ahead in trying to capitalize on as many opportunities as the EaP could possibly offer, although with a different rate of success. The EU, on the other hand, is driven by a constant need to reassess and reaffirm its normative power. ‘Exporting’ its values and standards allows the EU to legitimize its domestic construction and ensures lower costs of interaction with the external world.¹ By providing EaP countries with the opportunity of political association and economic integration, the EU facilitates the Europeanization of its neighborhood. Conditionality, socialization and lesson-drawing are the tools that make EU a ‘missionary’ normative power.² These tools have proven the



Eastern Partnership states (Courtesy: Creative Commons)

Eastern Partnership states (Courtesy: Creative Commons)

¹ Epstein, R.A. and Sedelmeier, U., “International Influence beyond Conditionality, Postcommunist Europe after EU enlargement”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 15:6, 2008, p.795 — 805, http://www.interactproject.org/content/docs/reading_list/Beyond_conditionality_international_institutions_in_postcommunist_Europe.pdf, (20.03.2015).

² Schimmelfennig, F., “Europeanization beyond Europe”, *Living Reviews in European Governance*, Vol. 4, No 3, 2009, <http://www.livingreviews.org/lreg-2009-3>, (20.03.2015).

efficiency of soft power approaches towards an embattled and contested region. It goes without saying; the logic of attractiveness has been very persuasive in nudging EaP countries, particularly Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, to rationally follow and implement European values and standards, notwithstanding the speed and depth of that process.

Still, the EaP is not driven by exclusively soft power considerations. Bearing in mind that the EaP was primarily conceptualized and spearheaded by the new eastern members of the EU, with the notable exception of Sweden, certain security concerns of countries like Poland, the Czech Republic and the Baltic States have also likely played a role. Thus, a good dose of self-interest contributed to the goal of making the immediate neighborhood more stable and predictable. It is certainly a legitimate concern, given the past, but also the present developments in the region. At the same time, the EaP embodies the contribution of new eastern member states to EU decision-making and, to some extent, an overall response to the French-driven Union for the Mediterranean. Thus, the EaP boosts the profile of the new eastern members within the EU under the premise of 'experience-sharing.'³ Indeed, common communist past and the excruciating free market and democratization reforms make Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries perfectly suited for sharing their experience and know-how with the EaP countries still struggling to put their past behind themselves. Therefore, the CEE-EaP nexus presents a great laboratory of Europeanization.

Despite being an EU construct, EaP countries also represent a region with a common past and rather similar political, social and economic difficulties. Thus, a number of questions with tremendous political implications arise. Mainly, whether there is room for a common identity among EaP countries and is there a chance these countries can agree on a common foreign policy vision of their relations with the EU? One can also ask, rhetorically perhaps, if these countries can overcome the handicap of being part of an externally driven platform and establish a genuine intra-regional cooperation. Because, ultimately, there is little hope about these countries being able to effectively pull their limited resources together and achieve mutually desired goals, no matter how noble and desirable those goals may be.

GUM – The New Visegrad?

In just six years from its inauguration, the EaP has become a two-tier framework of cooperation. Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine signed and ratified their Association Agreements (AA), including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreements (DCFTAs), thus, making a conscious choice in favor of European integration, and committing themselves to pursuing structural reforms. The pace and quality of those reforms are still questionable,

³ Vahur M., "Shining in Brussels? The Eastern Partnership in Estonia's foreign policy", Perspectives vol.19, No 2, 2011, p.67-80.

nonetheless. The other three EaP countries either showed little or no interest in advancing their relations with the EU (Belarus and Azerbaijan) or changed their mind in light of alternative economic integration opportunities (Armenia). Apart from their deliberate decision to slow down their agenda of reforms (Armenia, Azerbaijan) or even make a statement to not engage with the EU at all (Belarus), there is another significant trend deeply rooted in public opinion, largely based on the communist past and conservative religious worldviews, that European values go against local ethics and traditions.⁴ EU conditionality sparked heated debate on how respect for sexual minority rights, religious non-discrimination, or even general democratic values and economic pluralism do not fit the fabric of local cultural heritage.

It becomes vivid that important institutions, like the church, play the role of 'domestic veto players' keen on framing the EU as a standard bearer for LGBT rights, however this is hardly the key factor for choosing a rather diluted reform agenda in the countries' cooperating with the EU. It is more realistic to assume that the leadership of these countries is just not ready to invest all their political capital into one single major foreign policy vector. Therefore, despite the strong pull factor of the European Union's attractiveness, the counterbalance of Russia's Eurasian Union presents a feasible alternative. It is all the more true when looking at the much lower degree of systemic differences between the EaP countries and the Eurasian Union members, compared to the EaP and the EU. In addition, the lack of political will on the part of EaP countries to undertake painful reforms with no clear membership perspective in sight certainly makes integration with the Russia-driven Union a much easier option.

It is all the more commendable that at least three of the six EaP countries stay on course, becoming potential examples for the rest. Namely, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (GUM) have committed themselves to a European integration agenda, albeit still hardly an irreversible one. However, it remains unrealistic to expect these countries to coordinate their actions with regard to their joint foreign policy goal to the extent of developing a common identity based on a shared vision underpinned by common interests. To complicate things even further, it is expedient for both supporters and opponents of Euro-Atlantic integration to speculate that EU integration is informally contingent on NATO membership, which, despite not being the case, is another apple of discord in the countries concerned. Thus, the capacity of the GUM countries to actually internalize and effectively share the Visegrad Group's *raison d'être* – Euro-Atlantic integration – is questionable, to say the least.

⁴ Grigoryan H., "Democracy in Armenia. EU's Eastern Partnership as a Supportive Tool Towards Democracy", July 2013, <http://www.acgrc.am/paper.%20democracy%20in%20Armenia.pdf> (22.03.2015).

It is noteworthy that, apart from the primary goal of advancing European integration, the Visegrad Group was also designed as a framework for facilitating intra-group military, economic and energy cooperation.⁵ These efforts were rooted in a common foreign policy identity at the time epitomized by the concept of 'returning to Europe' – a notion that implied a return to democracy, liberal economic and social order.⁶ Individual country stance on recent developments in Ukraine have somewhat diluted that common identity. Still, the major difference is that the CEE countries had a memory of already having had experienced these values during the inter-war period, whereas GUM countries, have no such previous experience to relate to. GUM countries had not enjoyed sovereignty before the fall of the Soviet Union. Therefore, one could not speak of a 'return to Europe', other than in a geopolitical term, but rather a 'rapprochement to Europe', which is a much weaker basis for building a common identity. Not only do GUM countries have to make the effort of putting their Soviet past behind, they also need to learn from scratch what it means to make a free and independent choice of associating themselves with the EU, while also being prepared to suffer the costs of their decisions.

As a corollary of their common past, GUM countries experience common security concerns as a result of Russia's 'neuralgic imperial hangover.'⁷ Recent developments in Ukraine remind Georgia and Moldova about their own vulnerabilities in the form of separatist regions. Another important question arises. Are these security risks sufficient to foster a regional security alliance or at least deepen military cooperation? In a normative sense, it is almost a rhetorical question, however empirically things are complicated. Russian speaking minorities in these countries, the physical distance between them as well as the presence of Russian forces on their territory make military cooperation difficult. Furthermore, according to its constitution, Moldova is a neutral country and will hardly renounce its current status for an uncertain regional alliance with limited security guarantees. Georgia and Ukraine are also more likely to look for security guarantees under the umbrella of a robust political-military structure, rather than invest in a weak regional security mechanism. Still, in a normative sense, these stumbling blocks should not preclude the GUM from pooling their resources together in order to boost their defense capabilities.

Is it feasible to expect that European integration and commitment to EU values would cultivate a sense of common regional identity? There is little doubt that the EU's attractiveness has the potential to steer the governments

⁵ Nosko A., "Sharing the Experiences of Visegrad Cooperation in the Western Balkans and the GUAM Countries", March 2010,

http://www.academia.edu/1671186/Sharing_the_Experiences_of_Visegrad_Cooperation_in_the_Western_Balkans_and_the_GUAM_Countries (22.03.2015).

⁶ Tulmets E., "East Central European Foreign Policy Identity in Perspective. Back to Europe and EU's neighborhood", Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 22.

⁷ Youngs R., Pishchikova K., "Smart Geostrategy for the Eastern Partnership", November 2013, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/publications/?fa=53571> (20.03.2015).

of these countries towards pursuing reforms that are indeed supported by large parts of the population who are in favor of European integration. However, Europe's normative power, coupled with tangible benefits (such as visa liberalization and trade opportunities), is still not enough to do away with the inherent dichotomy between eastern and western tracks of development. A societal cleavage between 'European reformers' and 'supporters of post-Soviet status quo' remains a major impediment to effective reforms. Therefore, a clear European membership perspective, and the conditionality it entails, could mitigate some of these post-Soviet challenges of democratic transition like rampant corruption and monopolized economy. European integration can help overcome these structural flaws, as long as GUM countries can create a regional model of active EU integration that would adhere to EU values and standards in sharp contrast to 'the second tier EaP countries.' Yet, the question still stands: Is 'rapprochement to Europe' foreign policy identity strong enough to foster intra-regional cooperation? Can this identity be considered irreversible?

Why Is Deeper Cooperation Such an Uphill Battle?

Even though European integration seems to be the democratic choice of a majority, albeit a narrow one, of all the people in GUM countries, the influence of important domestic and foreign players still poses the question whether the process is irreversible or not. Ratification of the respective Association Agreements, coupled with the reward of visa liberalization (already achieved in the case of Moldova) in stark contrast to Russian assertiveness in the form of trade embargoes, make GUM countries ever more determined to follow through with their EU integration course. So far, it is unlikely that the process of reforms and harmonization with EU norms and standards will fall victim to a sudden change towards an alternative economic framework of integration, as in the case of Armenia's surprising U-turn towards the Eurasian Economic Union.⁸ Such a shift would not only imply serious adjustment costs, but also major popular upheavals, as vividly demonstrated in the case in Ukraine. Both Tbilisi and Chisinau governments must have learned the "Yanukovich-lesson".

Even if this combination of positive and negative incentives were enough to make the European path irreversible, it is not sufficient to build a strong and consistent identity in line with the concept of 'rapprochement to Europe.' Coming closer to Europe is not just about tangible rewards from the EU, but also implies significant structural changes within these countries driven by a determination to break away with the past. EU's 'more-for-more' principle seems to have exhausted its potential. The ratification of AA and DCFTAs

⁸ Popescu N., "Eurasian Union: the real, the imaginary and the likely", Chaillot Paper - No132 - 09 September 2014, <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/eurasian-union-the-real-the-imaginary-and-the-likely/> (20.03.2015).

along with visa liberalization was perceived as the main incentive for reforms. Now that these incentives no longer apply, there is an expectation for new carrots from the EU, such as labor market access, or even membership perspective. Yet, a solely incentives driven agenda is not sustainable in the long run.

Furthermore, there is also the perception that rewards offered by the EU and the speed of negotiating and signing then ratifying the AA and DCFTAs were triggered, first and foremost, by the need to make the EaP a success story and later by the Ukrainian crisis. Therefore, real reforms did not matter as much. All GUM countries failed to improve their position on the corruption perception index from 2012 to 2013.⁹ Nevertheless, all three countries concluded AA and DCFTA negotiations in 2013, despite serious high-level corruption scandals in Moldova and Georgia, not to mention Ukraine. This kind of inconsistencies on the part of the EU call its normative power into question and undermine its credibility and magnetism in the eyes of GUM citizens, who are mostly eager to see serious structural reforms. Thus, weak and selective conditionality on the part of EU does not only delegitimize the whole reforms process, it also makes people question the attractiveness of the rapprochement to a European agenda.

On the other hand, the rather fragile identity streaming from the notion of rapprochement to Europe is hardly the only cause for weak intra-regional cooperation. Geographical determinism plays a significant role. In order for GUM countries to cooperate efficiently, there is a need for strong interconnections. Georgia is geographically isolated from Moldova and Ukraine, and even the latter two are partially separated by the separatist region of Transnistria. Furthermore, there seems to be no other mechanisms of cohesion. The Visegrad countries, besides their European integration goals, had a considerable degree of intra-group trade exchanges. GUM countries occupy a small share in each other's trade balances, which does not amount to sufficient economic interdependence, but creates fierce regional competition for markets, which does not contribute to the spirit of cohesion.¹⁰ Other areas of competition include: energy security (competing energy projects), access to sea routes (the case of the Giurgiulesti port construction¹¹), and share of EU assistance, attention and interest in each of the three countries. Countries are trying to capitalize on the weaknesses of their partners in order to shine in front of Brussels in order to get higher rankings on the EaP progress index, surpass competition and receive better rewards. It is a healthy race to the top, but it does not contribute to a spirit of camaraderie and even less so to a common regional identity.

⁹ Corruption Perception Index 2013, <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/results> (20.03.2015).

¹⁰ Ivanov V., "GUAM: Old Problems New Challenges", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, № 4-5 (5859) / 2009, <http://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/guam-old-problems-and-new-challenges> (20.03.2015).

¹¹ Ibidem.

National and regional security concerns have been another major factor inhibiting regional cooperation, when it should have in fact boosted it. Despite the fact that all three countries face fundamental security threats to their territorial integrity, there have been few signs of solidarity and support that have gone beyond political rhetoric. Understandably, reluctance to get involved in each others' difficult security milieu is apparent by the unwillingness to trigger Russian retaliation. Therefore, any signs of solidarity most often amount to formal declarations or, at best, to high-level visits of support. This has been the case with Georgia in 2008 and is certainly the case now with Ukraine. There is also some contempt with Ukraine in Chisinau for the way Kiev has behaved with regards to the Transnistrian settlement process, remaining a benign observed at best, when it could have been a true partner. Things are changing slowly, but too many opportunities have been lost.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Given all of the above mentioned circumstances, it is highly unlikely that GUM countries will develop a level of cooperation that could live up to the Visegrad example. Intra-regional cooperation is inhibited by the competitive nature of the EaP policy and by the difficult security and geopolitical context in which these countries are trapped. However, this is not an insurmountable impediment to their European integration path, quite the opposite. The competitive nature of the EaP will incentivize GUM countries to perform better and win higher rewards from the EU. Yet, this is likely to happen at the expense of regional solidarity.

At the same time, the EU needs to re-conceptualize its normative power approach towards the region, as the current framework has been largely discredited by the EU's overreliance on positive incentives that failed to induce any meaningful progress in the anti-corruption record of these countries. The EU's attractiveness is based on a set of political, economic and social values that people in these EaP countries crave for. They identify deeper European integration with the respect for the rule of law, efficient market economy and higher level of social tolerance and inclusion. Thus, the EU needs to make new incentives contingent on deeper structural reforms. There is no doubt that the GUM countries have undertaken significant reforms compared to the 'second-tier' EaP countries, but these reforms still need further widening and deepening as well as stronger enforcement.

At the same time, it is paramount for the EU to identifying a new generation of incentives for the GUM countries. In this respect, the new Swedish-led proposal for a 'European package'¹² addressed at the Vilnius Summit is a good roadmap towards outlining the future cooperation between EU and

¹² Vilnius Summit Non-Paper. "20 Points on the Eastern Partnership post-Vilnius." 2014 <http://www.scribd.com/doc/206150753/20-Points-on-the-Eastern-Partnership-post-Vilnius> (17.04.2015).

GUM countries. Putting more emphasis on public diplomacy efforts, designing appropriate answers to possible security concerns and finding ways of involving EaP countries in EU missions offer interesting perspectives of new partnership dimensions.¹³ Still, with no membership perspective, genuine reform will be hard to come by.

The EU needs to formally distinguish among the more engaged group of EaP countries and the 'second tier', otherwise the entire framework is jeopardized. The EU also needs to engage EaP countries more on the multilateral level, like the Euronest Assembly, in order to foster regional identity. Joint projects among EaP countries would also contribute to stronger intra-regional ties. Ultimately, the EU needs to employ stronger conditionality on the anti-corruption and rule of law front. Finally, EaP member countries should pool their resources together in areas of common interest like interconnectedness infrastructure projects, regional security and policy coordination. Information and experience sharing regarded EU policy approximation is another relatively easier field of common actions. In the end, even if common regional identity might be too much to ask from these rather heterogeneous countries, this should not impede them from capitalizing on the benefits of closer regional cooperation.

¹³ "The European Union's Eastern Partnership." *Council on Foreign Relations*. <http://www.cfr.org/europe/european-unions-eastern-partnership/p32577> (27.03.2015).

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