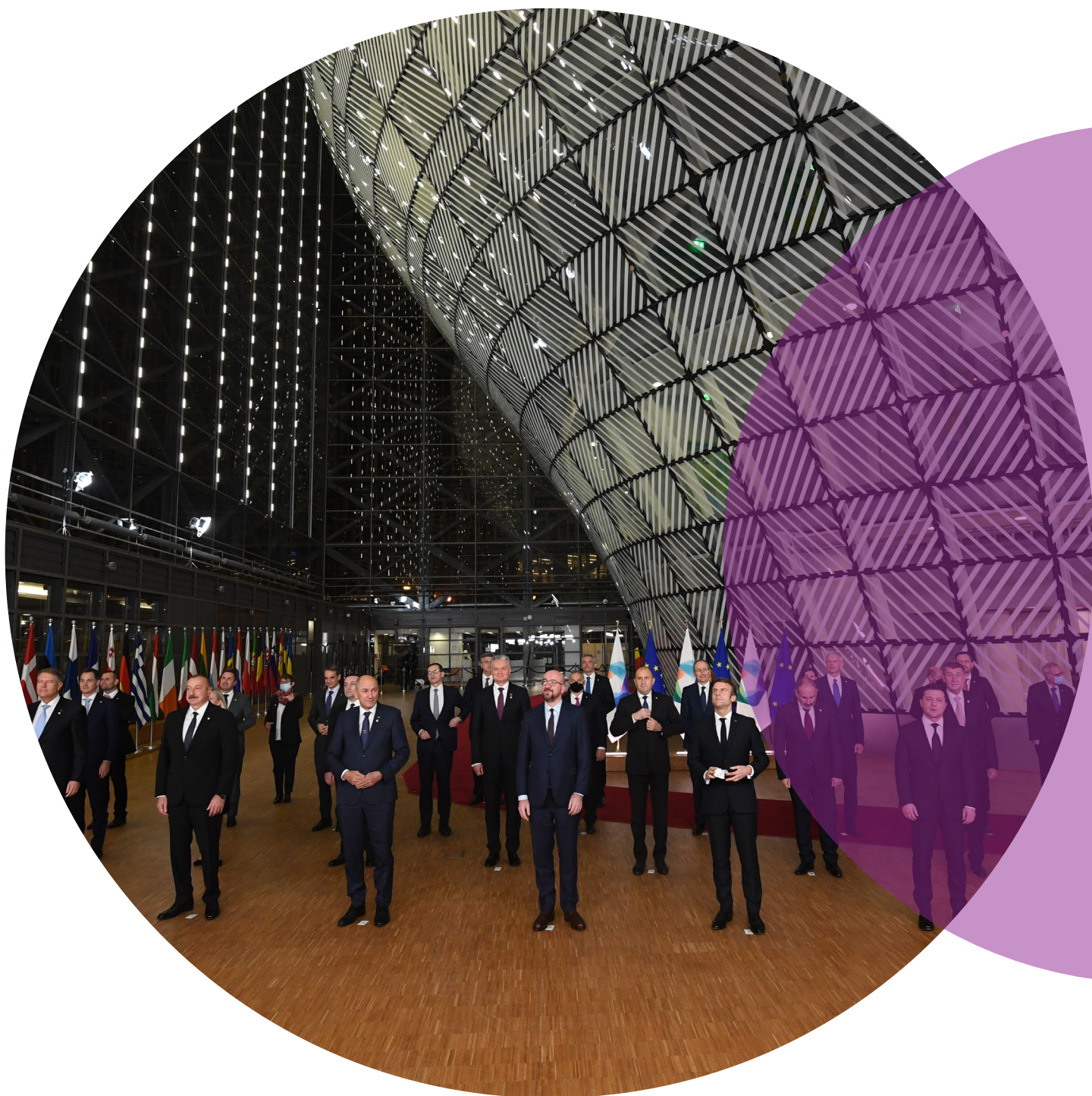


# Eastern Partnership countries in flux: From identity politics to militarization of foreign relations



**Hybrid CoE Trend Reports** highlight trends and theme clusters related to hybrid threats. They provide multiple perspectives on current security challenges and generate academic discourse on the topic. They aim to distinguish between what constitutes a threat, what appears to be a threat but is not necessarily one, and what has the potential to become one.

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**The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats**

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**Hybrid CoE's mission** is to strengthen its Participating States' security by providing expertise and training for countering hybrid threats, and by enhancing EU-NATO cooperation in this respect. The Centre is an autonomous hub for practitioners and experts, located in Helsinki, Finland.

The responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.

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# Foreword

The European security environment is becoming increasingly unpredictable. In addition to the traditional military domain, security threats are trickling down to all aspects of social life as democratic states encounter threats from actors who are willing and more able than ever before to attack domains not perceived as belonging to the core field of security (our social networks and structures, value systems and identities), using a creative combination of multiple tools to achieve their goals and push their strategic interests in unacceptable ways.

Analyzing emerging trends related to security and highlighting long-term undercurrents will increase understanding of the changing security environment and preparedness to respond to potential hybrid threats in the future. Being able to read trends makes it possible to place current events in context and helps distinguish between what is a threat, what looks like a threat but is not necessarily one, and what has the potential to become a threat in the future.

The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) operates expert pools to support its Participating States and the activities of the Centre's Communities of Interest. The expert pools work as a forum for exchanging information, building connections, and gaining a comprehensive understanding of the trends under a specific theme. These trends are then linked through Hybrid CoE to potential hybrid threats. The expert pools are an ongoing process and provide content for the Centre's work. Engaging with the expert pools and the related activity is in line with Hybrid CoE's founding Memorandum of Understanding, which states that Hybrid CoE is to act as a hub of expertise, to offer collective expertise and to encourage strategic dialogue.

This activity should adopt a multidisciplinary and academic approach. Thus, the purpose of engaging with the expert pools is not to pursue a single truth, but rather to provide multiple perspectives on current challenges, to share perspectives on the academic discourse on the topic, and to serve as a background for policymakers. The added value of this work is that it examines the subject from a hybrid-threat perspective. Each Participating State, the EU and NATO can then consider which facets of knowledge will be most useful for them from their perspective.



# Executive summary

## **Trend 1: Redefinition of the EU's role in EaP countries**

The Russian war against Ukraine consolidated and reinvigorated the EU's policy towards EaP countries. Firstly, the EU clearly supported Ukraine by providing economic, military, political and diplomatic assistance. Secondly, it opened the door to accession, granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, while keeping this possibility open for Georgia. Thirdly, the EU engaged in the Caucasus as a new peace broker. All of these actions confronted Russia's claims to those states as a privileged zone of influence, and strongly linked the EU's security with the security and stability of EaP countries.

## **Trend 2: Russian identity politics through propaganda and disinformation campaigns and the societal polarization in Western and Eastern Europe**

In its propaganda and disinformation campaigns, Russia is becoming increasingly reliant on different identity politics, which has become a central feature of its political warfare strategy, not only against EaP countries but also against the broader West. The Russian war in Ukraine has given the Kremlin new narratives to deepen, intensify and radicalize pre-existing divisions. Along with exploiting identities, Russia has been trying to utilize different forms of social mobilization. Consequently, it abuses democratic social movements, as the Kremlin sees them purely as a means of exerting its malign influence. The end goal of these activities is to continue to undermine cooperation with the West and democratization processes.

## **Trend 3: Growing militarization of foreign relations**

The security situation in and around EaP countries has been constantly deteriorating, and the process is gathering speed. Foreign relations in the EU-Russia neighbourhood have been militarized. This trend is mainly embodied in the Russian war against Ukraine and the atrocities committed against the civilian population. It has been reinforced by Belarus's hybrid threat operations against its neighbours; political tension and security incidents in Moldova; perpetual border incidents in Georgia; and the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh War. This trend ushered in new dynamics in the region, with Russia's diminishing role in the Caucasus, Belarus abandoning its formal "neutral position", the rising assertiveness of Azerbaijan, and the EU playing a more significant role in the security domain.

## **Trend 4: Instrumentalizing economic interdependencies to challenge the EU**

Russia has been reinforcing its bargaining position in the EU and EaP countries by further instrumentalizing interdependent economic sectors, mainly energy, food and fertilizer production. Additionally, the Kremlin has tried to exploit the loopholes in the sanctions regime to further undermine the EU's position and strengthen its own foothold in the EaP countries. Russia has skilfully used the worsening security and economic environment in Europe to reinforce its propaganda and disinformation campaigns aimed at destroying the EU's image in EaP countries and compensating for the reputational losses caused by the war in Ukraine.

**Trend 5: “Vassalization” of Belarus**

Since the 2020 rigged presidential election, the Lukashenko regime has been steadily abandoning the country’s formal neutral position and playing the role of a full-fledged hybrid-threat actor targeting EU countries. This ‘new’ Belarus facilitated the migration crisis on its border with the EU, engaged in cyber operations against EU member states, and has finally played a crucial supporting role in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Lukashenko has not only made Belarusian territory available for Russia’s invading forces and rocket systems, but has also been continuously threatening Ukraine with potential direct engagement in the war. In conjunction with the poor Russian military performance, the Lukashenko regime has been drawn ever deeper into the war, further cementing Belarus’s new role.



# Introduction

The Eastern Partnership (EaP) is a political construct that has served the European Union in its political and economic engagement with Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan for more than 13 years. From the very beginning, it was criticized for its lack of coherent vision and unclear agenda. The considerable differences between EaP countries in their approach to the EU and democratic standards have been constantly underlined. Nevertheless, as a political construct, the EaP was immediately recognized by Russia as another battlefield for influence and dominance. Hence, political decisions brought a new entity to life which, to a large degree, framed relations between the EU and Russia in their common neighbourhood. Some experts believe that the successes of EaP programmes (e.g., enhanced economic cooperation, systemic reforms, development of civil society) prompted Russia to intensify its hybrid threat operations in EaP countries and eventually led to Russia's military invasion of Ukraine. For all of these reasons, Hybrid CoE decided to take a deeper look at the trend developments that have shaped the hybrid threat environment in EaP countries and influenced the EU's economic, societal and security policy towards them.

The real game changer for the EU and all EaP countries has been the Russian military invasion of Ukraine. Russian military aggression has undermined the relevance of the whole EaP programme by drastically changing the dynamics in Eastern Europe and Western perceptions regarding this region. The scale of the changes in economic and political relations remains to

be seen, but it is clear that there is no going back to the pre-war geopolitical setup.<sup>1</sup>

Some experts argue that in the face of Russian military aggression, the EaP is completely obsolete, in contrast to the previous era when there was still hope for some kind of strategic political and economic cooperation with Russia in the common neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup> Others, while underlining the merits of the EaP, call for the EU to create a new security strategy towards the EaP countries and reinvigorate the enlargement policy, as Russian aggression in Ukraine has destroyed the previous order and brought about a new geopolitical reality.<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that the EaP's relevance has diminished considerably due to the Russian war. Along with candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova, the EaP's agenda and general purpose has been downgraded. However, it may still serve as a useful platform for engaging countries that are not included in the enlargement policy (e.g., Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) and for maintaining contact with the democratic opposition and civil society in Belarus.<sup>4</sup> Many believe that Russia's invasion of Ukraine and militarization of Russian foreign policy has woken up the EU as a geopolitical player in the region. It has already translated into more robust engagement in Ukraine and Moldova, and has the potential to further dynamize the EU's policies regarding the remaining EaP countries.<sup>5</sup>

At the first stage of this project, Hybrid CoE sent a survey to selected regional experts, asking them about the situation in the Eastern Partnership in broader terms. That work was finalized before the war in Ukraine. After

1 Moshes, 'Beyond the Eastern Partnership'.

2 Ibid.

3 Konończuk, 'No Stable EU Without a New Eastern Enlargement'.

4 Raik, 'Time to Downgrade the Eastern Partnership and Refocus on Enlargement'.

5 Havlicek, 'The Future of the EU's Eastern Partnership Policy: "Back to the Basics and Value Origins"'.

collecting responses, Hybrid CoE's experts started to map out the hybrid threat environment in the EaP. This initial work was supplemented by a fact-finding mission to Georgia and Armenia that allowed more observations to be conducted on the ground with the help of NGOs, foreign diplomats, and governmental circles. In June 2022, Hybrid CoE organized an expert workshop during which trends that had already been identified were further discussed and analyzed. At the end of October 2022, Hybrid CoE arranged a closed seminar for academic experts where the initial draft of the trend report was reviewed through the prism of the Russian war against Ukraine and the changing security environment in Europe.

The ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, and rising confrontation between the West and Russia in the EaP countries, is reflected in all of the trends identified in this report. The war itself turned out to have a tremendous impact on the EU's stance towards the EaP countries and Russia: The EU has been forced to redefine its enlargement policy and its goals regarding the EaP project. The **redefinition of the EU's role in EaP countries** and its new policies will considerably influence not only EU-Russia relations, but also the political and security landscape in those states. The observed **militarization of foreign relations** in Eastern Europe with the full-fledged war in Ukraine, and the still smouldering military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, is contributing to a worsening security environment in Europe. All of this is amplified by further actions conducted by Russia,

which has exercised hybrid- threat tools in its coercive diplomacy against Moldova. Moreover, by weaponizing **identity politics** through propaganda and disinformation campaigns, Russia has been able to contribute to the further polarization of societies in Western and Eastern Europe, which serves to heighten discontent and mobilize populations against governance structures. Furthermore, Russia has exploited economic and political hardship in the West by **instrumentalizing the interdependent economy sectors to challenge the EU** and to present itself as a remedy for modern emerging global challenges: global pandemics, energy shortages, and food scarcities. Among the participants in the EaP, only **Alexander Lukashenko's regime** in Belarus has clearly cut ties with the EU. The country has become a furious opponent of EU policies, a hybrid-threat player, and an even closer ally of Russia, subordinated to its political directives.

The Russian war against Ukraine has thrust the EaP countries into an uncertain situation, and what will emerge after the war is highly unpredictable. While measuring the level of hybrid threats and malign actor influence is a complex issue, taking a closer look at developing trends should help in assessing the strength of malign actors and the extent of the existing vulnerabilities of EaP countries. This report firstly introduces the EaP countries before looking at the hybrid threat trends outlined above one by one. It concludes by offering some recommendations for the EU on how to limit Russia's malign influence in the EaP countries.

# A snapshot of Eastern Partnership states

## Ukraine – a bombed road to the EU

**Since 2014, consecutive Ukraine governments have clearly and loudly expressed their willingness to join the EU, even if the reform process and freeing the country from oligarchic capture proved to be herculean tasks and a constant challenge.** Nevertheless, the key development determining Ukraine's future position in the EaP and its path to the EU and even NATO will be the outcome of the current war with Russia. It is no exaggeration to say that to a large extent the Euro-Atlantic future of Ukraine will be decided on the battlefield. The fact that at some point, as a result of the war, Ukraine may have one of the biggest and most relatively modernized armies in Europe will certainly influence Kyiv's and Brussels' position regarding Ukraine's NATO future. Ukrainian society has already proved several times that integration with the European Union is the preferred way ahead for the country, and is its highest priority. The war in Ukraine serves as an additional catalyst which further consolidates the anti-Russian and pro-European forces, with war atrocities wholly alienating people against Russia. As a result, derussifying Ukraine's state and society has gathered new speed and determination.

In June 2022, Ukraine was granted EU candidate status, which opens up opportunities to accelerate its integration process with the EU, and positions the country as a frontrunner in the accession process. Ukraine seems to be determined to exploit this opportunity as much as possible and has already pressed ahead to fulfil the EU's candidate recommendations.<sup>6</sup> At

the same time, paradoxically, Russia's invasion has accelerated some integration processes. For example, Ukrainian and Moldovan electricity grids were synchronized with the Continental European Grid, Ukraine joined the Common Transit Convention, and the EU has suspended all quotas and tariffs on Ukrainian exports to the EU.<sup>7</sup>

Even before the war, EU institutions gave Ukraine credit for the significant changes carried out in recent years. Ukraine was praised for "its ambitious reform programme, including on anti-corruption, reform of the judiciary, constitutional and electoral reforms, improving the business climate and energy efficiency, as well as administration and decentralisation reforms, although progress in these areas has been uneven".<sup>8</sup> The European Commission claimed that Kyiv had brought its legislation and law enforcement practices in line with EU standards by about 70%.<sup>9</sup> Still, much work remains to be done, especially in fighting corruption (Ukraine ranked 122<sup>nd</sup> in Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index), improving the rule of law (especially in the judiciary system as Ukrainian courts are infamously corrupt), de-oligarchizing, and securing civil rights. However, Ukrainian efforts to transform the country have gained even more significance in the context of the ongoing war. Strengthening the rule of law and anti-corruption structures will not only prove that the war is not degrading Ukraine's state, but also that Kyiv is ready to professionally implement the EU's post-war reconstruction financial packages.<sup>10</sup>

6 Brzozowski, 'Ukraine rushing to show progress on EU-bound reforms'.

7 Raik, 'Time to Downgrade'.

8 Przetacznik, Russell, 'Eastern Partnership post-2020 agenda'.

9 Statement by President von der Leyen on the Commission's opinions on the EU membership applications by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

10 Havlicek, 'The Future of the EU's Eastern Partnership Policy'.

### Box 1. Dilemmas to monitor regarding the future of Ukraine

How will the ongoing war change Ukraine? How will the devastation of infrastructure, and large migration influence the country's future?

Is there a risk that the militarization of society and necessary war-like measures to defend the country will slow down democratic reforms in Ukraine?

Or, conversely, will Ukraine exploit the momentum and finally push through long-opposed pro-European reforms, including de-oligarchization and anti-corruption measures?

Is the political impetus created by the Russian war against Ukraine and Ukraine's reform efforts enough to overcome the scepticism of some EU member states regarding the country's membership? Or was the candidate status just a geopolitical gesture and will Ukraine be forced to repeat the Western Balkan scenario, waiting years to start the negotiation process?

Is the large migration of Ukrainians to EU countries another factor devastating its society, economy and army? Or will it, in fact, enlarge the support network in the West and pose a great opportunity for the young generation to educate themselves in the EU and potentially further contribute to the country's development?

As Ukraine has radically moved away from Russia during the war and cut off existing leverage, while successfully repelling Russia's military invasion, Moscow has targeted its hard military tools directly against Ukrainian society by attacking critical civilian infrastructure, and duly wreaking dramatic economic destruction on the country. This has forced millions of Ukrainians to migrate abroad, further crippling its economy, army, and society. Meanwhile, in the seized territories, teachers and academics brought over from Russia have tried to eradicate young people's Ukrainian identity by means of forced education. However, it seems that Russia's war against Ukraine has had an additional side effect, which might bring about a positive outcome in the long run. The devastation of Ukraine's industrial base, coupled with the wartime measures introduced by the Ukrainian government (e.g. nationalization of several strategic companies, and consolidation of the media sphere) have the potential to finally break the curse of the oligarchy, which has held sway over the country in recent decades.<sup>11</sup>

### Moldova – rollercoaster-like ups and downs

**The Moldovan government, along with President Maia Sandu, are strong adherents of the country's integration into the EU. The current authorities are making yet another attempt to reform the country and meet the EU's accession requirements.** For many years, Moldova has been considered a poster child of the EaP, loudly expressing its ambitions for EU membership

<sup>11</sup> Minakov, 'The War and the Future of Ukraine's Oligarchy'.

from the very beginning. In 2014, it signed the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (AA/DCFTA) with the EU, boosting EU-Moldova political and economic ties. Over the years, the EU has become Moldova's principal trading partner with a 52.3% share in total trade, outpacing Russia, its longstanding main trade partner.

However, the Moldovan success story concealed some serious shortcomings. The state was captured by oligarchic systems (embodied by the oligarchic rule of Vlad Plathoniuc over the country), which mimicked the pro-European agenda and pretended to implement a reform process to cover up their true intention of securing private businesses, and financial abuse of the state.<sup>12</sup> Those who questioned the true nature of Moldovan progress were intimidated by the prospect of pro-Russian forces taking back power in the country. With the sham pro-European policy, Moldovan authorities completely discredited the EU for years. Only recently, with Maia Sandu winning the presidential election and her Party of Action and Solidarity securing a landslide victory in the July 2021 parliamentary election, has hope for genuine reforms in Moldova surged again. The current government is focusing on anti-corruption measures, the rule of law, the economy, and good governance.

Unlike in Ukraine, the ongoing Russian war did not bring about consensus in Moldova regarding its European future. On the contrary, it made the division between the pro-European and pro-Russian choice even sharper, which is one symptom of long-standing hybrid threat

## **Box 2. Dilemmas to monitor regarding the future of Moldova**

To what extent will the outcome of the ongoing Russian war influence Moldova's future?

Can we expect an aggressive military-like Russian intervention in Moldova if the country makes further progress in its accession processes?

Would the EU's political and economic support be enough to shield the country against Russia's malign influence?

Will Russian efforts to cripple the country and change the government prove to be successful and will Moldova change its political course once again?

Or will the Moldovan government's determination, EU support, and societal resilience be enough to overcome Russia's malign influence and continue pro-EU reforms?

activities. In light of the country's EU candidate status, Russia has increased its malign influence to destabilize Moldova and remove the pro-European government from power. To this end, Gazprom has steadily reduced gas deliveries to the country, which disrupted its electricity and heating systems and caused an uptick in energy prices. The Kremlin's intention is to further diminish the support base of the government (which had already happened) while increasing the popularity of the populist, pro-Russian SOR party. According to investigative journalism,

<sup>12</sup> Reuters, 'Moldova accuses tycoon of involvement in \$1 billion fraud'.

the SOR party has received considerable funding and manpower support from Russia.<sup>13</sup> Moldovan authorities are afraid that along with the worsening living standards of the population, SOR-organized protests and aggressive tactics could escalate and be used to topple the government.

This situation is exacerbated by other long-standing systemic problems in the country. Besides being almost completely dependent on Russia regarding its energy security, Russia's media messaging is widely present in Moldova as a large part of the population rely on Russian-language information. Russia has connections to the Moldovan oligarchic system, and other pro-Russian political forces are still popular besides the SOR party. In addition, Russia has a strong influence over the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, which had already expressed its secessionist tendencies and held a referendum in 2014 to join the Russian-led Eurasian Union. Lastly, there is the breakaway Transnistria region, which has kept up military (Russian military contingent, local militia), economic (gas debt, energy deliveries) and political (possible settlement of the conflict) pressure on Moldova for years.

### Georgia – a fading Georgian dream?

**As in the previous two cases, the Georgian government also openly expressed its ambitions to integrate into the EU by applying for EU membership. However, the genuineness of its commitment to reforms and democratic values has been questioned over the years.** The picture of Georgian performance within the EaP is mixed. While considered the most pro-West-

ern of the former Soviet Union countries, with tangible results in reforming the country and fighting corruption, the ruling Georgian Dream party, in power since 2012, has been criticized for continually eroding democracy.<sup>14</sup> On the one hand, the country has expressed its interest in deeper cooperation with the EU, but on the other hand, the government has tried to control the independent media and civil society, with the result that pro-Russian discourse is no longer stigmatized, leading to the political re-legitimization of pro-Russian political parties and media outlets. Russia's propaganda portraying the West as a danger to traditional Georgian orthodox values finds fertile ground and strong support in parts of society.

The Georgian government has come under heavy criticism from EU members in recent months over the treatment of jailed former president Mikheil Saakashvili, its ambiguous stance on the Russo-Ukrainian war and its ensuing refusal to join sanctions against Russia, as well as some ongoing rulings against opposition politicians and the media that are interpreted as politically motivated. Generally, the failure of the constitutional and judicial reforms has been seen as a way for the Georgian Dream party and associated oligarchs to maintain their influence and secure their hold on power. Moreover, the setback in judicial and law enforcement systems is becoming increasingly visible, as a political bias is obstructing efforts to tackle high-level corruption, while EU calls to establish an independent anti-corruption agency have not been followed up.<sup>15</sup> Military reforms since 2012 have been assessed as modest at best, with a considerably reduced defence budget. On 9 June

<sup>13</sup> Belton, 'Russia's security service works to subvert Moldova's pro-Western government'.

<sup>14</sup> Przetacznik, Russell, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

2022, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for personal sanctions on Bidzina Ivanishvili, the Georgian Dream's founder and former prime minister, for his alleged links with Russia's regime.<sup>16</sup>

The Russian war has brought about additional political, security and economic shifts in the country. Georgia had already been struggling with Russian migration to the country since February 2022, but there was a significant increase after the announced partial mobilization in Russia. Fleeing Russians (IT specialists, conscripts-to-be, some anti-regime activists) may pose a security challenge in the medium to long term. In addition to that, many oligarchs and Russia-connected businesspeople are attempting to capitalize on the fact that Georgia did not join the sanctions regime against Russia, and may therefore serve as convenient intermediaries in obtaining banned goods and dual-use technology for Russia. Furthermore, the Russian war against Ukraine has caused significant disruption to international transportation routes. Trucks that once transported goods to and from Russian and Central Asian markets via Ukraine have had to divert and reroute due to international sanctions. Much of that traffic is now passing through Georgia. This poses a significant challenge to unprepared Georgian infrastructure and logistics, but also creates business opportunities for the country.<sup>17</sup>

On top of that, the political scene in the country has become increasingly polarized, with the opposition accusing the ruling party of fraud in the last two elections and boycotting the parliament. Recently, the only force that has been able to influence the government and

### **Box 3. Dilemmas to monitor regarding the future of Georgia**

Will Georgia be able to seize the opportunity now that the EU membership perspective has been opened up, albeit not yet with candidate status?

Is the Georgian government genuinely committed to fulfilling the 12 EU-listed conditions that need to be implemented by spring 2023?

Or is the Georgian ruling party more interested in securing power even at the expense of sliding further into authoritarianism?

To what extent is civil society and the third sector in Georgia able to mitigate the ruling party's autocratic tendencies?

Does Russia have enough resources and leverage to hinder Georgia's reform processes?

How will the geopolitical changes in the Caucasus region influence Georgia's political future? Are they creating new opportunities or posing additional obstacles?

Can Georgia exploit the visible weakening of Russia's position in the region to its advantage? Can it influence its relationship with the separatist entities?

force it, through massive protests, to change some of its controversial decisions is the resilient civil society.

Under the Georgian Dream party's rule, the country's dependence on Russia increased,

<sup>16</sup> Aga, 'Georgian government braces for blocking of EU candidacy', 71.

<sup>17</sup> Gabritchidze, 'Ukraine war leads to traffic jams in Georgia'.



strengthening the Kremlin's influence over its development.<sup>18</sup> Russia has strong business connections in Georgia,<sup>19</sup> coupled with the interests of local oligarchic structures in keeping business with Russia running. The same oligarchs are interested in retaining their influence over the internal political developments. In addition to the above-mentioned leverage, the frozen conflict with two separatist entities (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) has been a convenient tool for influencing Georgian internal politics and for further undermining the country's sovereignty and ability to control its own territory (vide so-called borderization<sup>20</sup>).

### **Armenia – between a rock and a hard place**

**The government of Nikol Pashinyan has expressed its interest in deepening cooperation with the EU through the EaP.** Hence, it has engaged in an ambitious reform agenda that has started to bear fruit. Even though Armenia has tried to use the EaP to integrate more deeply with the EU over the years, the precarious security situation has forced all of Armenia's consecutive governments, regardless of their political affiliations, to rely on Russia's security guarantees. Historically, Russia has been perceived as a saviour in Armenia, while Moscow has utilized Armenia's economic isolation to strengthen its position as an indispensable – and sole – Armenian ally in the neighbourhood.<sup>21</sup>

However, security agreements and economic cooperation with Russia come at a price. In

October 2014, Russia pushed Armenia into joining the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union, duly discarding the AA/DCFTA bill that had already been brokered with the EU. Instead, a few years later, Armenia signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which excluded a free trade agreement that would conflict with the country's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. Generally speaking, any prospective rapprochement by Armenia with the EU has been limited by its commitments to Russia.

With the coming to power of a new, pro-reformist government under Nikol Pashinyan, as a result of the Velvet Revolution in mid-2018, Armenia once again, with certain limitations imposed by the security setup, resumed its pro-European agenda. Pashinyan's government introduced an ambitious reform programme, focusing on objectives such as ending political influence over the courts and tackling corruption. The results were encouraging, with Armenia moving up in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index from 105<sup>th</sup> place in 2018 to 58<sup>th</sup> place in 2021 out of 180 countries.<sup>22</sup> There was similarly impressive progress in press freedom and democracy.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, experts point to the thriving civil society and expanding third sector. Yet the development of European-like civil society, even if supported by the government, is impeded by the large part of society which is still susceptible to Russia's

18 The number of Russian companies registered in Georgia increased to 6,400. In addition, imports from Russia increased by 51% in the first six months of the year. For more on this, see: Hovhannisyan, 'The game of influence in the South Caucasus', 76–81.

19 Transparency International, 'Georgia's economic dependence on Russia: Impact of the Russia-Ukraine war'.

20 Borderization – the process of demarcation along and beyond the border between Georgia and the self-declared Republic of South-Ossetia conducted by Russian troops.

21 Petersen, 'From emperors to refugees', 115–116.

22 Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021>.

23 Przetacznik, Russell, 11.

propaganda portraying the West as degenerated and in decay.

The lost Karabakh war with Azerbaijan in 2020,<sup>24</sup> followed by a series of clashes and the Russian war against Ukraine, introduced new geopolitical dynamics in the region, which translate into a weakening of Russia's position, an increasing role for Türkiye as a security player in the Caucasus, and the rising self-confidence of Azerbaijan. Many experts underline that Russia's role as Armenia's main security protector and guarantor of the region was undermined, as it failed to respond to Armenia's call for Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) assistance during Azerbaijan's September attack. Moreover, looking at Russia's poor military performance in Ukraine, there is reasonable doubt that Russia would be able to successfully intervene on Armenia's side if a larger conflict broke out in the region. Armenian disillusionment over Russian guarantees and Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine opened the way to the EU, which, surprisingly for many, has taken the lead in peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

### Azerbaijan – on its own

**Azerbaijan has had the luxury of developing an independent foreign policy of balancing between regional powers** (Russia, Türkiye, the EU, and Iran) **due to secured high revenue from the export of oil and gas.** The Azeri regime has strengthened its position in recent years and reinforced its legitimacy with the victorious 2020 Karabakh War. Additionally, in 2022, with the security umbrella provided by Türkiye – its longstanding partner – and Russia's passivity

### Box 4. Dilemmas to monitor regarding the future of Armenia

Will the lost Karabakh War and ongoing military and political tensions derail Armenian pro-democratic efforts?

Will the precarious military situation again push Armenia closer to Russia as the only power able to provide military assistance in the event of war?

To what extent is the undermined credibility of the CSTO influencing Armenian strategic thinking?

Can the EU's new, reinvigorated role as a peace broker further decrease Russia's leverage towards Armenia? Might it serve as an opening for deeper engagement by the bloc in the political and economic development of Armenia?

And finally, what futures would open up for Armenia if Russia was pushed out of the region?

and preoccupation with Ukraine, Azerbaijan has pushed harder to consolidate its military victory over Armenia, accelerate the integration of new lands, and finalize the peace negotiations.

The gaining of confidence by the regime simultaneously translated into narrowing the space for independent NGOs, a free press, and independent experts. Due to the above-mentioned consolidation and stabilization, even the Azeri regime's already superficial interest in EU-proposed reforms is low. The Azeri authorities

<sup>24</sup> The so-called Second Nagorno-Karabakh War that was waged in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories between Armenia and Azerbaijan in October and November 2020. As a result of Azerbaijan's victory, Armenia was forced to cede to Azerbaijan the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh that it had occupied since the First Nagorno-Karabakh War in 1994.

have clearly shown that they are not interested in any form of systemic cooperation with the EU, besides doing business.

They oppose any societal activities that might endanger the current regime's hold on power, and hence the continuous suppression of civil society and independent media have left little room for individual activism. The negotiations on the partnership agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan that started in 2017 have stalled, with no visible progress.

For the Azeri regime, participation in the EaP has never been about changing or reforming the country and duly gravitating towards the EU. For them, it was part of the balancing policy

between regional powers and the search for business opportunities. At the same time, the EU is keeping a close eye on Azeri autocratic rule as the country has been considered an important source of non-Russian oil and gas in Europe's diversification plans. This has become even more important since Russia cut off gas deliveries to Europe, while Azerbaijan agreed to increase its deliveries by 30% in 2022 and double them by 2027.<sup>25</sup>

In its relationship with Russia, Azerbaijan remains the most independent EaP country. For years, Russia has played an important role in regional security regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh region, while attempting to influence Azerbaijan's foreign policy with bilateral agreements.<sup>26</sup> However, poor performance in the war with Ukraine has shaken Russia's position, making Azerbaijan even more of an independent and assertive regional player.

#### **Box 5. Dilemmas to monitor regarding the future of Azerbaijan**

Will the expected EU-brokered peace deal finally end the Armenian-Azeri conflict and neutralize Russia's long-term leverage towards both countries?

Can the increasing energy cooperation between the EU and Azerbaijan serve as a foundation for closer relations in other areas? How will the further deterioration of Russia's position as a security actor in the region influence Azerbaijan's foreign and domestic policy?

On the other hand, how will Russia's attempts to retain its influence in the region, by military or hybrid means, determine Azerbaijan's future?

#### **Belarus – rogue state**

**Since the brazenly rigged presidential election in August 2020 and brutal crackdown on the opposition, Belarus has become a furious opponent of the EU and an even closer ally of Russia.** This was reinforced by Belarus's participation in the Russian war against Ukraine as Russia's military planning assumed that a quick capture of Kyiv would be based on the military assault being launched from Belarusian territory. To this end, Belarus has changed radically from an EaP participant looking for additional funding into a country openly opposing all values represented by the EU, brutally cracking down not only on the third sector in the country but society as a whole, and conducting aggressive

25 RFE/RL, 'Azerbaijan Says Will Increase Gas Exports to Europe This Year By 30 Percent'.

26 'Declaration on allied interaction between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation'.

hybrid-threat operations against its neighbours. Belarus's participation in the EaP is currently suspended. In terms of bilateral agreements, in July 2020 the EU and Belarus signed visa facilitation and readmission agreements that were cancelled only a couple of months later following the political developments in the country.

One of the direct effects of Alexander Lukashenko's policies has been the large migration of political and social activists, as well as educated specialists (e.g., IT sector) out of the country. The phenomenon has only been reinforced by the Russian-Belarusian war against Ukraine. New opposition figures in exile, with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya being the most important, established a new power centre, claiming to be legitimate representatives of the Belarusian people. Indeed, they have been treated by many Western governments almost like official representatives of the Republic of Belarus.

Belarus has never been truly interested in the EaP agenda. Instead, Lukashenko's regime sought to play its alleged engagements with the EU off against Russia to obtain more favourable conditions in oil and gas agreements. Regarding reforms promoted by the EaP, Belarus has never gone further than releasing some of its political prisoners or temporarily easing its harsh policy towards independent NGOs, associations, opposition politicians, and journalists.

Belarus's deep economic, social and military reliance on Russia at various levels makes Belarus not just susceptible to Russian influence but virtually totally dependent on Russia's political directions. Belarusian institutions have almost certainly been infiltrated by Russian special services, while a large part of the country's

### **Box 6. Dilemmas to monitor regarding the future of Belarus**

Has participation in Russia's war against Ukraine sealed the Lukashenko regime's fate as a rogue state?

Will the country further reintegrate with Russia to the point at which it becomes, in fact, a part of the Russian Federation?

Might Ukrainian successes in the war create an opening for political change in Belarus? Might this mark the beginning of decoupling from Russia?<sup>27</sup>

Is there enough potential within the Belarusian opposition and society to play a meaningful role in reshaping the future of the country, conceivably in the post-Lukashenko era?

strategic energy assets are already owned by Russia.

The country's economy is dependent on Russia's market, credit lines and subsidies (also in the form of cheap oil and gas). The Russian language (officially and privately) and Russian media outlets dominate in Belarus, and the Kremlin's perception of the world is influencing Belarusian society. However, it should be underlined that Belarusian society is largely against the country's engagement in Russia's war against Ukraine.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the Belarusian military forces are strongly interlinked with their Russian counterpart and integrated into their planning for the Western

<sup>27</sup> Faller, Gluzdov, 'When Russia is over...'

<sup>28</sup> Chatham House, 'Belarusians' views on the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine'.

Military District. Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine has considerably enlarged Russia's military footprint in Belarus and de facto transformed many Belarusian military bases into Russian bridgeheads. Since the beginning of the war, Belarus has served as a launching site for Russia's rocket attacks against Ukraine. Additionally, in October, Belarus announced the deployment of a joint Belarusian-Russian regional group of forces tasked with addressing "NATO provocations at the border".<sup>29</sup>

29 Shraibman, 'What's Behind Russia's New Deployment of Troops to Belarus?'

# Hybrid-threat trends in the Eastern Partnership countries

Throughout 2022, Hybrid CoE actively cooperated with several experts from diverse backgrounds to analyze developing trends affecting the security environment in Eastern Partnership countries. The principal goal of the project was to identify and describe the main evolving security, political and economic phenomena that translate into a worsening hybrid-threat environment in the EaP countries, and also in the EU as a consequence.

As a result, experts engaged in the project identified five key trends that will increase the potential for hybrid-threat activities in the short to medium term.

# Trend 1: Redefinition of the EU's role in EaP countries

The Russian war has significantly changed the EU's attitude regarding its geopolitical stance in the region. For many years, the EU had no intention of clashing with Russia over neighbouring territories denying geopolitical elements of EaP programmes. Currently, the EU has adopted a clear position, supporting Ukraine at every possible level. It is not trying to mediate between Kyiv and Moscow (which was observed after 2014), but has been providing Ukraine with economic, military, political and diplomatic assistance,<sup>30</sup> which creates a foundation for Ukraine's military successes in the war. By sending weapons and financial assistance to Ukraine and engaging politically (sanctions) and diplomatically (the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process), the EU has started to compete with Russia using appropriate geopolitical tools.

Moreover, the decision to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status, while keeping the door open for Georgia, clearly confronts Russia's claims to those countries as a privileged zone of influence. The EU expressed its commitment to defending the core principles of its security, which is directly connected with the security and stability of EaP countries.<sup>31</sup> The dramatically changing geopolitical environment in Europe has, however, also rendered the EaP framework outdated, and ill-adjusted to the new geopolitical reality. It remains to be seen to what extent the most sceptical EU member states would be prepared to overcome their reluctance towards full engagement with EaP countries (with a new more ambitious policy), also in terms of potential accession. As of now, the EU has been making unprecedented efforts to support Ukraine in

particular, but also Moldova with initiatives like the Moldova Support Platform, organizing the next European Political Community summit in Chisinau, and establishing an EU Military Assistance Mission.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, considerable work has been also done by the EU in planning the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine.

The ongoing war set in motion new political and economic processes that have been reshaping the common EU-Russian neighbourhood. It seems that as of now, Ukraine is to remain at the top of the EU's list of priorities. With a new candidate status, the practical integration processes with Ukraine have already accelerated beyond the limits of the EaP programmes. In a time of war and during Ukraine's preparations for integration, the EaP is an inadequate tool for supporting the country. The question remains, however, as to what extent the EU is serious about Ukraine's (and Moldova's) accession and to what extent it was just a 'political gesture'.

Ukraine nonetheless seems determined, and has already been implementing a number of the EU's recommendations despite the war. The danger is, however, that Ukraine and Moldova might repeat the never-ending story of the EU's enlargement in the Balkans. Several Western Balkan countries received candidate status, but the EU has not been able to open the accession talks for years. Experts suggest strict conditionality by linking progress in reforming some Ukrainian and Moldovan governmental and societal institutions to the enlargement processes, but at the same time, caution about using this as a pretext for postponing membership.<sup>33</sup> Russia's full-scale war of aggression in Ukraine has destroyed the exist-

30 Moshes, 'Beyond the Eastern Partnership'.

31 Raik, 'Time to downgrade'.

32 Council of the EU, 'Ukraine: EU launches Military Assistance Mission'.

33 Moshes, 'Beyond the Eastern Partnership'.



ing security order in Europe. However, the continent is on the threshold of a new political era, and the momentum to push for changes in the direction required is yet to be fully exploited.<sup>34</sup>

Russia's war against Ukraine has also introduced new political dynamics in the Caucasus, where Russia's position has apparently weakened,<sup>35</sup> while the EU has emerged as a new peace broker. Russia's complete focus on Ukraine has negatively affected its military capabilities in the region. In addition, the perceived failure of the Russian peace mission and the passivity of the CSTO in the face of Azerbaijan's aggressiveness further undermined trust in Moscow as a security player in the region.<sup>36</sup> In the light of Russia's declining position, the EU is attempting to play a bigger role in regional security policy. The leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan met in a series of meetings organized by EU President Charles Michel (in May, August, and October 2022). The sides have already agreed on several issues, including the deployment of the EU civilian observer mission on the Armenian side of the border, and delineating and demarcating their mutual border.

Along with its engagement in security issues, the EU has expressed interest in larger economic and political developments in the Caucasus. In recent months the EU, Armenia and Azerbaijan have been engaging in talks regarding trade, energy, transportation, humanitarian issues and democratic developments. The region has risen in importance because, due to the war, many export routes from Asia to Europe have been diverted to the so-called Middle Corridor through the Caucasus. The EU is also providing

significant financial support for Armenia (EUR 2.6 billion) and Azerbaijan (EUR 2 billion).<sup>37</sup>

The settlement of the long-lasting conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan may potentially open up new opportunities for them in their cooperation with the EU. Deeper engagement by EU institutions in the region coupled with a decrease in Russia's leverage will reinforce the need for new, reinvigorated EaP policies towards regional states.

### Issues to monitor

- The EU should keep a close eye on the democratization processes in EaP countries and the fulfilment of EU recommendations/requirements, especially in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. All of the countries have expressed their wish to join the EU, while all have enormous reforms to complete. Their commitment to the reforms and actual progress may serve as an indicator of their genuine intentions.
- Russia's reaction to the EU's engagement in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process should be closely monitored. The scale and resolve of Russia's responses may serve as an indicator of its genuine influence in the region and reveal whether it is truly diminishing.
- Changes of government, especially triggered by the economic crisis, may translate into a radical change in a country's foreign policy. Some of those changes might be facilitated by Russia's malign influence. In this context, the volatile political situation in Moldova should be observed.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Kononczuk, 'No Stable EU Without a New Eastern Enlargement'.

<sup>35</sup> Mankoff, 'As Russia reels, Eurasia roils'.

<sup>36</sup> Chanadiri, 'The South Caucasian dimension of the war in Ukraine'.

<sup>37</sup> Isayev, Kucera, Mejlumyan, 'EU emerges as major player in Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations'.

<sup>38</sup> Russia attempted to destabilize Moldova in February 2023, see e.g.: 'Ukraine war'.

## Trend 2: Russian identity politics through propaganda and disinformation campaigns and the societal polarization in Western and Eastern Europe

In its propaganda and disinformation campaigns, Russia is becoming increasingly reliant on different identity politics, which has become a central feature of its political warfare strategy, not only against EaP countries but also against the West in general. In its quest for influence, interference and tools to undermine democratization processes and successful EU enlargement and neighbourhood policies, Russia has reinvigorated identity politics, enabling Moscow to reach out to Slavic and Russian-speaking minorities in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. Russia employs ethnic (Slavic), religious (Russian Orthodox Church) and cultural (former Soviet Union and conservative set of values) identities to “divide and rule” the societies of targeted states.<sup>39</sup> It also uses Cold War narratives of alleged US imperialism and the EU as a weak, selfish entity. The use of identities is reinforced by the political instrumentalization of history. History is subordinated and serves to lay a foundation for promoted identities. This effort is embodied in numerous Russian organizations active abroad, whose primary goal is to further promote Russia’s agenda.<sup>40</sup>

The Russian war in Ukraine has given the Kremlin new narratives to deepen, intensify and radicalize existing divisions. In Ukraine, this is

pushed to the limit. Russia’s authorities do not recognize Ukraine as an independent nation with a separate history and culture. Hence, Russia is undermining the most basic identity of Ukrainians – being Ukrainian. In Russia’s view, Ukrainians are not only part of “Russkiy Mir”, they are also part of the Russian ethnic nation. In Russian occupied territories, they try to impose this identity on Ukrainians, specifically focusing on younger generations (for example by “importing” teachers and academics from Russia and discarding Ukrainian books, as well as installing pro-Russian billboards all over seized cities).<sup>41</sup> In line with the war, Russia’s propaganda shifted and became more brutal. Russia’s propaganda outlets and main TV channels have persisted with the dehumanizing rhetoric and genocidal narratives, denying Ukrainians the status of human beings.

The trend evolved as Russia sought to further divide and disrupt societies in the EU and EaP countries. Russian propaganda outlets have focused on narrower and narrower identities, exploiting emergent or previously weak dimensions of identities. The main purpose of this policy is to amplify discontent, shake up social structures, and mobilize populations against governance structures. To this end, alongside national, ethnic and religious identities, they

39 Mahmoudian, ‘Russian “Identity Warfare”’.

40 The Russian Orthodox Church, the Russkiy Mir Foundation, the Gorchakov Fund, and Rossotrudnichestvo – to mention just a few of the largest ones, which are surrounded by a group of smaller organizations, all funded or co-funded by the Russian state.

41 Giladi, ‘Ukraine is not about territory, it’s about identity’.

also heavily exploit sexual identities as well as other social group affiliations.<sup>42</sup> This kind of politics gives everybody something, but not an alternative system or coherent vision – rather, a mix of elements instead. This is done on purpose to maintain ambiguity and blur strategic aims.

Along with exploiting different identities, Russia is interested in utilizing various forms of social mobilization in EU and EaP societies, starting from non-violent protest groups advocating policy change or reform, for example, to radical paramilitary groups that are willing to use violence to achieve social or political change. A common feature across these post-modern, identity and issue-based protest movements is that they lack clear structural roles, are often leaderless, and are organized through social media and internet-based forms of communication. Hence, Russia has been trying to abuse social movements, which are a vital part of each democracy. Democracy is about having the possibility to influence politics not just through elections but via multiple channels, and Russia sees those channels as a tool for its malign influence.

This new propaganda and disinformation based on identity politics does not primarily aim to achieve a united pro-Russia front. For Russia, it is enough to create political instability and social fever that translates into reinforced social and political divisions and the polarization of whole societies in EaP and EU countries. Once society is polarized, it is easier to manipulate, influence or disturb it with fake news and other forms of disinformation. The final goal of these activities is to undermine democratic processes,

the cooperation with and between EU structures,<sup>43</sup> and any democratization reforms. Therefore, it should also be noted that in its political warfare strategy, the Russian government does not seek to exploit a single protest movement that would cause the collapse of a targeted country's government (although that would be ideal). Rather, it aims to create and support conditions leading to the emergence of a multitude of movements that, when combined, serve to undermine governance structures and create chaos.

### Issues to monitor

- The EU should closely observe protest movements across EaP countries as well as in the EU. Russia has exploited existing divisions and contradicting identities within EU and EaP countries. This phenomenon will only gain importance once the economic situation worsens further and the EU diverts its attention to handle the crisis in its own backyard. Crisis-like situations in Europe are a springboard for Russia's propaganda campaigns aimed at government changes, for example in Moldova.
- As identity politics is gaining importance and has been instrumentalized by Russia to divide citizens in the EU, it is worth paying attention to the narratives that appear around the identities of citizens in European countries. Russia's propaganda and disinformation is aimed at destroying any attempts to build European identities open to diversity and that try to contradict an exclusive approach that narrows them down to only ethnic terms.

42 Expert workshop, Hybrid CoE, Helsinki, 7.6.2022.

43 Gahler, 'Boosting the EU's soft power in Eastern Partnership countries'.

- Monitoring Russia's media outlets and propaganda narratives in EaP countries is of utmost importance. Banned in the EU, most of Russia's propaganda channels are free to operate in EaP countries, while local independent mass media are underdeveloped.<sup>44</sup> Observation of Russia's propaganda outlets in EaP countries may also help the EU to identify and oppose in advance the main themes in Russia's identity politics.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

## Trend 3: Growing militarization of foreign relations

Another important trend is the growing militarization of foreign relations that has been shaping the region. The security situation in the EaP has been constantly deteriorating and the process is gaining speed. It has accelerated with the Azeri-Armenian war over Nagorno-Karabakh; Belarusian hybrid threat operations against its neighbours; political tension and security incidents in Moldova; perpetual border incidents in Georgia; and finally, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The ongoing economic crisis, with the preceding two-year-long Covid pandemic restrictions, have also contributed to the growing security deficit in EaP countries. On top of that, the economic war between the EU and Russia (sanctions, gas cut-offs, destruction of infrastructure) is only further deepening the securitization of relations in the region. This trend will only accelerate with the worsening economic situation in Europe.

Along with the poor military performance in Ukraine, war atrocities and divisive rhetoric, Russia seems to be losing a large part of its positive influence and soft power in EaP countries. Therefore, it is forced to invoke aggressive hybrid-threat and military tools to achieve an expected effect. This militarization of its relations with neighbouring countries, along with more frequent use of hybrid-threat and military tools to reach political objectives, has been shaping the security environment in the EU-Russia neighbourhood for years.

Russia will not abandon hard military tools in its foreign policy, as was clearly illustrated by the invasion of Ukraine. When a direct military invasion fails to achieve the expected results, Russia does not hesitate to use these hard mili-

tary tools directly against civilian targets. Since September 2022, seven months after the war started, Russia has been conducting massive strikes against the Ukrainian economy (destruction of critical infrastructure, such as hospitals, power plants, and bridges) and society (forced migration, mass executions, depriving citizens of electricity and heating, all intentionally leading to a humanitarian catastrophe).

Despite the general failure of the military invasion to achieve Moscow's objectives, Russia demonstrated its will to exercise the same tools in other regions. In April and May 2022, three months into the invasion, Russia increased military tensions in the breakaway Transnistria region in Moldova. The region witnessed a series of security incidents, including hand grenade launchers firing on government buildings in Tiraspol, explosives at local airports and Russian radio stations, as well as alleged attacks on a fuel depot. The blame for the incidents was put on Ukrainians, as well as on Moldovan special services. The successive security incidents serve multiple goals: besides threatening Ukrainian forces in the west of the country, they were a reminder to Moldovan authorities that military sabotage is a legitimate tool in Russia's toolbox and that it might easily be exploited against Moldovan energy infrastructure, for example. This fact gains additional importance amid the ongoing energy dispute between Russia and Transnistria on one side and Moldova on the other.

For the last three decades, Russia has played the role of arbitrator in all conflicts in the post-Soviet republics and it will not give up this role easily, which might lead to further deterioration of the security situation in the region.

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Azerbaijan has expressed increasing assertiveness in the conflict with Armenia, basically ignoring Russia's peace-keeping forces deployed in the conflict area. Moreover, as Russia's political and security capabilities in the region have been undermined, the EU has re-emerged as the main force mediating a new peace deal between conflict parties (a role which only a year earlier was played by Russia). It remains to be seen whether Russia has sufficient resources and influence in the region to respond to its deteriorating position in the Caucasus.

In the context of the deteriorating security situation in the EaP countries, Russia will likely further instrumentalize military-to-military and military-technical cooperation as a means of deepening (strategic) partnerships or alliances. A case in point is Belarus, which Russia has, during its war in Ukraine, successfully lured away from its formerly declared "neutral position". With Belarus under its strong military influence, Russia obtained another tool to further destabilize the security situation in the region, for example by additional deployment of its armed forces<sup>45</sup> or possibly even by utilizing Belarusian forces as a useful proxy. In the case of Armenia, Russia's military assistance might still be in demand, depending on the situation on the ground and progress in the peace talks. To compensate for the poor military performance in Ukraine and to mitigate the notion that Russia cannot engage in another military confrontation in the region because of its heavy engagement in the current war, the Kremlin will likely exploit the image of a reckless country,

an irrational actor, which does not follow the Western way of thinking. For an actor like this, national pride, dignity and international status are more important than Western logic-based calculations.

### Issues to monitor

- Signs of a further Russian military deployment in the EaP countries should be closely monitored. Given Russia's profound differences with the EU and NATO over the European security architecture, Russia might enhance its presence in the NATO/EU Eastern Flank by deploying further troops in Belarus (in the form of an official permanent base) and Armenia (by extending existing bases as additional assurance in the face of Azeri aggressiveness). This would further challenge the security balance in the region and increase tension between the EU/NATO and Russia.
- Dynamics within the conflicts in the post-Soviet area might be a good indicator of Russia's general position in the region and of the extent to which those countries, despite Russia's poor military performance in Ukraine, still regard Moscow as the main security guarantor.
- In times of trouble and a rising security deficit, EaP countries will likely seek more security assistance. In order for EU policies to succeed in the region, it is important that EaP countries do not find new security guarantors outside of the EU and NATO community, as that will further undermine the EU's position in the EaP.

45 bne IntelliNews, 'Russian military activity in Belarus and Putin's hopes for bringing his ally into the conflict'.

- Close observation of activities conducted by pro-Russian forces in those countries that have visibly advanced in their pro-European policies and reforms may help to gauge Russia's influence and understand its intentions. Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and their societies are a likely target for new, intensified Russian hybrid-threat operations, whose aim is to hinder their integration into the Western political structures.



## Trend 4: Instrumentalizing economic interdependencies to challenge the EU

Russia has been reinforcing its bargaining position in the EU and EaP countries by further instrumentalizing interdependent economic segments, mainly the energy sector, along with food and fertilizer production. At the first stage, Russia prepared the ground for trend development by launching the restricting phase during which Gazprom decreased its gas deliveries to Europe (back in 2021). Later, during the war in Ukraine, Russia's forces aggravated the food scarcities in global markets by blocking Ukrainian ports. At the next stage, Russia moved on to so-called food and energy diplomacy.<sup>46</sup> Additional food and energy deliveries have been offered or promised to friendly countries, governments and even political parties (Moldova) as a part of Russian fraternal or humanitarian support, akin to what was observed during Covid-19 with Russia's vaccination diplomacy. The worsening economic situation, aggravated by Russia's energy cut-offs and blackmail, is only fuelling this trend. EaP countries are more exposed to Russia's economic blackmail, as in most cases they do not have the resources to turn to alternative suppliers,<sup>47</sup> while large swathes of their societies are susceptible to Russia's propaganda.

As the confrontation between the West and Russia over the EaP is gaining momentum, the Kremlin has tried to exploit the loopholes in the sanctions regime to further undermine the EU's position and strengthen its own foothold in the region. To this end, Russia reached out to oligar-

chic structures in EaP countries that have been useful for so many years in blocking EU-promoted reforms and preserving state capture. Oligarchs are eager to bypass imposed sanctions in their dealings with Russia. The whole process is facilitated as EaP countries have not taken part in the EU-led sanctions regime. This created another vulnerability that has been weaponized by Russia. It is effectively a win-win situation for both sides. Russia is building new ways to receive sanctioned goods, while oligarchs are making money. At the same time, both sides are strengthening their grip on the countries at the expense of the pro-reformist and pro-EU political forces.<sup>48</sup>

Russia has skilfully used the worsening security and economic environment in Europe to reinforce its propaganda and disinformation campaigns aimed at destroying the EU's image in the EaP countries, mostly underlining the general failure of the Western policy, while portraying Russia as a strong and influential international player.<sup>49</sup> The main narratives focus on blaming the EU policy (e.g., sanctions, green energy) for the magnitude of the current crisis in EaP countries, on underlining the alleged failures of the EU policy regarding the EaP, and on highlighting to EaP governments that there is a simple solution to the energy and food crisis by aligning with Russia. All of this is also utilized in the identity politics trend.<sup>50</sup>

Amid the global recession and general global climate crisis, Russia attempts to com-

46 E.g., "Russian company Uralchem, among the largest global producers and exporters of nitrogen, potassium and complex fertilizers, announced on July 28 it will supply its products (urea or compound fertilizers) to Africa on a free-of-charge basis. The project at this stage provides for humanitarian delivery of the first batch of 25,000 tonnes to Togo." For more on this, see: Aris, 'Russia woos Africa with arms, grains and nuclear power'.

47 E.g., Russia is the main exporter of wheat to Georgia (94%), Armenia (98%) and Azerbaijan (96%). For more on this, see: Hovhannisyan, 'The game of influence in the South Caucasus', 76–81.

48 Expert workshop, Hybrid CoE, Helsinki, 7.6.2022

49 Gahler, 'Boosting the EU's soft power'.

50 Closed expert seminar, Hybrid CoE, Helsinki, 26.10.2022.

pensate for reputational losses caused by the war in Ukraine. To this end, declared deliveries of cheap foodstuffs, energy and other natural resources to like-minded countries<sup>51</sup> serve to reinforce Russia's image as the leading global player which, regardless of the ongoing war, is simultaneously providing its 'humanitarian' assistance abroad. Against this background, the EU is portrayed as a failing organization that cannot address modern challenges and that is basically dependent on Russia as well. The same tactics were already used during the pandemic when autocratic regimes like Russia and China portrayed themselves as better suited to these kinds of modern global challenges than the allegedly slow and inefficient EU, or the West in general.

### Issues to monitor

- Russia has been controlling the flows of gas and grain and has supplied its allies with cheap energy, food, fertilizers, and other raw materials. Observing Russia's action may provide insights into its priorities, who is seeking its support, and where it is seeking to increase its influence.
- The implementation of EU-recommended economic reforms in the EaP countries should be monitored as an indicator of their commitment to the transition processes. Due to the economic crisis, the attention of governments and the people alike has been diverted towards basic needs like securing energy and food resources. Many EU-promoted reforms (e.g., green energy, the digital economy, fighting climate change) are costly and

require considerable determination from the political elite and society. It is a challenge to explain the reasoning behind them, especially with Russian propaganda undermining everything, including the discourse on climate change. The perceived mismatch in the EU policy will be easily exploited by hybrid-threat actors like Russia and China, as they might portray themselves as less demanding partners and propose alternative solutions seemingly better adapted to the needs of EaP countries.

- Instrumentalization of interdependent economic sectors is clearly visible in Moldova, where Russia aims at government change. The Kremlin has already promised cheaper gas and food deliveries to Moldova once the opposition takes power in the country. In addition, Russia has powerful energy leverage in Moldova (e.g., gas deliveries from Russia, electricity deliveries from Transnistria, Gazprom ownership of Moldovan energy assets), which has been applied to compromise the pro-EU government and give an additional boost to the opposition.

51 Promises followed by actual deliveries have largely been made to countries in Africa and the Middle East. In Europe, the same promise was made to pro-Russian Moldovan opposition party SOR. For more on this, see: Ceban, 'How Russia is seizing on discontent in Moldova'.

## Trend 5: “Vassalization” of Belarus

For many years, Belarus has been successful in its balancing policy between the EU and Russia. It was able to secure preferential oil and gas prices from Russia along with cheap credit lines, while keeping up the appearance of an independent and sovereign country, close but not subordinated to Russia. In times of economic difficulty, Belarus sold some of its strategic assets to Russia<sup>52</sup> to preserve remnants of its independence. At the same time, despite the regular harassment of any genuine opposition movements, independent organizations or pro-democratic activists, Belarus was able to secure its cooperation with the EU. The EU was not deceived about the true nature of the Belarusian political system or possible democratization and modernization of the country, but rather motivated by pragmatic and geopolitical considerations.<sup>53</sup> It did not want to isolate the Belarusian regime with an increasingly aggressive Russia in the neighbourhood, while at the same time enjoying a business-oriented partnership with Azerbaijan, a country with a poor human rights track record. Based on that, although at one point he called himself “the last dictator in Europe”,<sup>54</sup> Lukashenko was treated as a legitimate partner and was able to participate in the EaP project.

The balancing period of Belarusian foreign policy ended after the rigged August 2020 presidential election. It was not the first time that Lukashenko had falsified an election, while stifling any sign of social dissatisfaction. However, it was the first time that such a large part of

the population had openly reacted against election falsification. To retain power, Lukashenko turned to Russia for political and economic help and brutally suppressed any sign of protest, putting thousands of people in jail,<sup>55</sup> and blaming the EU, namely Poland and Lithuania, for staging an attempted coup. In effect, his regime was completely isolated and alienated from the West.

In the coming months, Belarus turned out to play the role of a full-fledged hybrid-threat actor targeting EU countries. In summer 2021, the Belarusian regime facilitated (with the help of state resources and special services) new migration routes, allowing thousands of people, mainly from the Middle East, to travel easily to Belarus. Then, with logistical assistance from the regime (accommodation, transportation, and guidance), those people were streamed to Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. The whole operation placed a huge burden on the border and migration services of those countries and created dozens of hotspots, with violent engagements between Polish and Lithuanian border services on one side and some groups of migrants armed (with stun and flash grenades, and wire cutting equipment) and supported by Belarusian border guards on the other. The operation was followed by a disinformation campaign, waged by Belarus in cooperation with Russia, in which Poland and Lithuania were presented as semi-Nazi countries with serious human rights and economic problems.<sup>56</sup>

52 E.g., between 2007 and 2011, Russia’s Gazprom gained full ownership of the Belarusian gas transit infrastructure by acquiring 100% shares in the Belarusian Beltransgas company, later renamed Gazprom Transgaz Belarus.

53 Marin, ‘Belarus: time for a “principled” re-engagement’.

54 Reuters, ‘Belarus President Lukashenko in his own words’.

55 As of 31 December 2022, the ‘Wiasna’ organization regards 1,448 persons in Belarus as political prisoners, <https://spring96.org/en>.

56 Dyer, ‘Belarus Since the Rigged Presidential Elections’.

In the months that followed, the Belarusian regime engaged in further hybrid-threat operations against the West. Belarusian cyber-threat actors were active in conducting hack-and-leak operations against EU member states. Previous security incidents, which were initially assessed as isolated and unrelated cases, started to fit into the new picture of Belarus as a hybrid-threat player with its own set of tools against the EU. Some cases in point include the Ryanair plane incident with one of the opposition activists being immediately arrested at the airport after a forced landing on Belarusian soil; and threats by a member of Belarus's National Assembly that other opposition activists could be brought back to Belarus from Poland and Lithuania in the boot of a car.<sup>57</sup>

The final accord in Belarus's transition to a hybrid threat actor subordinated to Russia has been its engagement in the war against Ukraine. Belarusian territory has played a crucial role in Russia's military planning against Ukraine. Russian forces used Belarusian land to conduct their eventually failed operation to quickly seize Kyiv. In addition, Belarus also hosts several Russian rocket systems, which are launched against Ukraine, and serves as a logistical support base for Russian forces.

Since the beginning of the war, Belarus has played an important role by threatening Ukraine with its potential engagement in the fight. To this end, Belarus is "warming up" the security situation, for example by organizing endless military exercises, increasing its military posture, announcing "counter-terrorist operations", moving military equipment along the

border, speculating in the mass media about joining the war, and deploying a joint military grouping along with Russian forces. Belarusian military posturing and intimidation are significant hybrid-threat operations that play a supporting role in Russia's regular military warfare in Ukraine. Their main goal is to intimidate the Ukrainian forces, keep them on edge, and tie them up in the region.<sup>58</sup> For Russia, on the other hand, Belarus serves as a convenient proxy to test EU civil and NATO military preparedness, and to poke the West with hybrid threat tools while staying in the shadows.

Caught up in the vicious circle of its engagement in hybrid threat operations against the West and Ukraine, Belarus has become even more dependent on Russia. However, Belarus took part in the assault against Ukraine in the first place precisely because of its subordination to and dependence on Russia. During the whole process, Russia and some other authoritarian regimes have basically remained Belarus's only partners. This "vassalization" of Alexander Lukashenko's regime has closely tied the country's future to that of its suzerain. When Russia is at war, so is Belarus; when Russia is winning and prospering, so is Belarus; and when Russia is losing and shaken, so is Belarus. The dynamics of the war and Russia's struggle to hold the front line have brought up questions of possible scenarios for Belarus. With the potential collapse of the current Russian regime, or just a lost war and an economic crisis, the strong multilayer back-up for Lukashenko may diminish. That in turn will have a direct negative effect on the Belarusian regime's ability to hold onto

57 bne IntelliNews, 'The Belarusian security threat – Part II'.

58 bne IntelliNews, 'What can we expect from Lukashenko's escalated war rhetoric?'.

power, especially taking into account how it has antagonized and polarized society. The outcome of the war will determine not only the future of Ukraine and Russia, but also that of Belarus.

### Issues to monitor

- Strengthening military cooperation between Belarus and Russia requires close monitoring as it considerably influences all NATO military planning for the region. Belarus has become an integral part of Russia's military planning in the Western Military District. The Russian armed forces have largely treated Belarusian territory as an extension of the Russian Federation, while the Belarusian armed forces have been de facto subordinated to Russia. These facts create a new security environment for the NATO Eastern Flank. Moreover, further concessions should be monitored, along with the deepening Belarusian dependence on Russia, possibly in the form of a permanent military presence, official military bases, the relocation of Russia's military assets to Belarus, as well as further alignment of the regime with Russia's geopolitical plans.<sup>59</sup>
- Belarus has taken on a new role as a hybrid-threat actor and an aggressor in the war in Ukraine. Consequently, it should now be observed from this new angle, as it will likely regularly engage in border provocations, with power projection by its military forces as well as security and special services adding to the militarization of the region. The intensity of those activities may indicate Belarusian readiness to cross more red lines, including the direct involvement of Belarusian armed forces in the war, further weaponization of migration, disruption of oil and gas transits, and facilitation of illegal drug and weapon smuggling. For many years, the EU border with Belarus was considered safe and calm, as it was closely guarded by Belarusians. As Belarus has become an active hybrid-threat actor, the EU must change the way it thinks about its eastern neighbour and potential threats emanating from that direction.
- Any new Russian acquisition of Belarusian strategic assets or progress in the talks regarding the Union State might serve as an indicator of increasing Belarusian dependence on Russia.

<sup>59</sup> bne IntelliNews, 'The Belarusian security threat – Part II'.

# What can be done to limit Russia's malign influence – recommendations for the EU

- **The EU can strengthen its position in EaP countries and reach its full economic, political and security potential by developing a united and clear policy towards those states.** Given Russia's war against Ukraine, EaP countries are at a historical crossroads, which opens a unique window of opportunity for the EU. A comprehensive EU strategy for the EaP that considers new security realities in Europe and recognizes the diversity of the six EaP countries will further extend the EU's influence and limit Russia's efforts to consolidate its geopolitical standing in the region.
- Considering the ever-increasing Russian malign influence in the EaP, the **EU should further support societal resilience in EaP countries.** Irrespective of the outcome of the current war in Ukraine, strengthening anti-corruption efforts, the rule of law and the independence of the media will contribute to the build-up of general societal resilience. In that context, taking a more serious role in strengthening and reforming the security structures of EaP countries might give the EU (and possibly NATO) tools to better assist in detecting and deterring Russia's hybrid-threat operations on the ground.
- Russia is interested in reducing the appeal and effectiveness of cooperation with the EU, to which end it will continue to use all hybrid-threat tools available. In order to mitigate that, **the EU needs to show tangible results regarding EU-EaP cooperation, primarily to the societies of those countries.** Winning the hearts and minds of citizens in EaP countries might be key in increasing their resilience, and their commitment to democratization processes.
- As confrontation with Russia has reached a completely new, record-high level and Europe is facing both economic and energy crises, EaP countries may slide down the EU's agenda. Despite economic difficulties, the **EU cannot and should not forget about the EaP countries.** More than ever, these countries – especially those that are struggling to strengthen their relations with the EU – need reassurance and assistance from the Union. Hence, the EU should pay constant attention to developments in EaP countries, particularly now, as it is the perfect time for a malign actor to take advantage of the situation and derail the EU's work on the ground. The EaP countries remain a top priority for Russia, and should therefore remain so for the EU.

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