

The EU after Brexit, Russia and the countries *in between*

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As it becomes increasingly clear that the result of the British referendum will be followed through, the consequences of the UK's exit from the EU will certainly reduce the Union's foreign policy clout and ambitions. With Brexit, the EU will lose an influential albeit sometimes semi-detached member, a diplomatic powerhouse, one of its biggest economies, its biggest defence contributor and one of its two members holding a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Moreover, the exit negotiations and the establishment of a new relationship with the EU are likely to consume a great deal of political energy over the next years. This will also undoubtedly impact the EU's relations with Russia but also those with the other countries in its eastern neighbourhood (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan). The EU should continue to defend the European security order by maintaining principled positions in relations with Russia but also increase its cooperation with the countries in the region, especially with the three associated countries.

In the last few years, Moscow has started to treat the development of EU relations with some Eastern European countries in the way it is treating NATO enlargement, as a threat to Russia's security and interests. Thus, Russia's tactic of supporting separatist conflicts in former Soviet republics, used in Moldova and Georgia in the 1990s and the 2000s, has been redeployed since March 2014 in Ukraine, with the annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of the Donbass. Despite the Minsk agreements, fighting in Eastern Ukraine hasn't stopped and the Kremlin doesn't seem ready to freeze the conflict, continuing to push for the destabilization of Ukraine and of its current government.

European leaders have repeatedly called to keep in place the Russia sanctions until the full implementation of the Minsk agreements. As this is not likely to happen any time soon given the situation on the ground, the sanctions are likely to be prolonged for some time. However, support for their maintenance is decreasing as some European leaders are pressed by influential constituencies to relax or lift the sanctions, the political agenda is crowded with other crises and Russia's cooperation is being sought on some of these dossiers (e.g. Syria, anti-terrorism).

Although the UK, one of the powers which guaranteed Ukraine's territorial integrity in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, didn't take a role in the Minsk process, London has been one of the most vocal supporters of the Russia sanctions and the new government is likely to continue to support that position. However, Brexit and the nomination of Boris Johnson as foreign minister, a politician who suggested that the EU bears responsibility for the Ukraine crisis, have already weakened London's credibility and make a relaxation of the sanctions regime more likely.

On the security front, the West is both applying deterrence, with NATO allies deciding at the Warsaw summit to deploy forces in some of the Eastern members of the alliance, but also promoting dialogue with Moscow. There is a visible desire to decrease tensions with Russia, with some constituencies, especially in Western and Southern Europe, also buying into the Kremlin's argument about the West's guilt in provoking the current crisis through its entry into Russia's sphere of interests.

As sanctions fatigue sets in, it is important to acknowledge that their main purpose is not to punish Russia, but to credibly communicate the EU's strong disagreement regarding its actions, to prevent it from further escalating the war in Ukraine, and pressure it to negotiate an end to the conflict. While initial expectations regarding the pace of Ukraine's transformation prove unrealistic, the EU's focus is increasingly moving towards Kyiv. While this is certainly necessary, one should not mix

things. The sanctions on Russia are not about how successful or not, or how corrupt or not Ukraine is, though Kyiv's failure to seriously reform will certainly further reduce the political will underpinning the Russia sanctions. It is important not to forget which country started a war of aggression and which country had its territorial integrity breached. The sanctions were imposed as a result of a very serious breach of international law and of the European security order. Is it thus crucial for the EU's credibility to apply them consistently but also keep them updated, to maintain their bite, while at the same time pushing for the implementation of the Minsk agreements, starting with the necessary ceasefire and retreat of heavy weapons. In time, strategic patience and a consistent defence of the principles of international law might lead to better conditions to reach a deal with Russia, especially if its economy will continue to stagnate, as expected.

Meanwhile, Russia's opposition to Western influence in the shared neighbourhood and its use of force have further decreased an already low appetite for EU/NATO enlargement among Europeans and Americans. To begin with, the six countries *in-between* have different levels of ambition for their relations with the EU and NATO. While Georgia and Ukraine seek NATO membership, Belarus and Armenia are militarily allied with Russia, and Moldova and Azerbaijan are neutral, internally divided and/or not interested in the issue. At the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, Ukraine and Georgia were given a membership perspective but several allies were – and still are – opposed to putting the two countries on the path to membership, the main argument being that an enlargement of NATO needs to reinforce the security of the Alliance, not weaken it. Concerning the EU, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia are interested in membership and are currently implementing their association agreements with the EU, including free trade area agreements, Armenia was forced by the Kremlin to renounce its already negotiated agreement, while Belarus and Azerbaijan didn't have or lost interest in the process.

The absence of a clear membership perspective for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is not likely to change in the foreseeable future. Enlargement fatigue, Russia's opposition strengthened through its threats and control of territories in all three countries, internal division within the Union and lack of public opinion support, a focus on EU's own security and the need to first integrate the Western Balkans will play against Western enlargement to the East. While full membership will likely not be on the table for some time, the implementation of the AA/DCFTA agreements and close relations with NATO will lead to partial integration of these countries, but without the security guarantees and economic benefits full EU and NATO membership would offer. This will not be satisfactory for the pro-Western elites of these countries and hopefully will be improved upon in the medium to long term.

As the Brexit negotiations and other challenges will focus a lot of the EU's attention, it will be especially important not to disengage. Confronted post-Brexit with a decrease in its power of attraction, the EU will also need to upgrade its balance of carrots and sticks to push for reforms, but also to try to visibly improve the well-being of the citizens of these countries. This will not be easy and new programmes and formats for cooperation will be needed. In the short term, following through on visa liberalization for Ukraine and Georgia will be key for developing relations and maintaining the Union's credibility.

Another challenge will be to promote EU interests and to engage with the three countries which haven't signed association agreements. Though less interested in wide-ranging reforms, they are interested in developing relations with the EU, in European markets and know-how but also in balancing Russia's influence.

In all six countries, the EU will also have to learn to communicate better. As the UK will negotiate a new framework for its relations with the EU, it might also be useful to communicate European integration as the differentiated and flexible process it really is, both inside the EU but also one that goes beyond its borders. While full EU membership should remain the main goal, the other forms of integration should not be undervalued and undersold.

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