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The Eastern Partnership at the Frontline of Europe's Security: Why the South Caucasus Matters

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 demonstrated that Eastern European security is inseparable from the active and collective efforts of Europeans. The war exposed how so-called peripheral regions, such as the South Caucasus, Moldova, and Belarus, have become frontlines in the struggle between democracy and authoritarian revisionism. In this context, the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) emerges as a central test of Europe's credibility. European defence now hinges on responding to Russia's war in Ukraine and countering China's expanding influence, transcending past neighbourhood policy frameworks.

This dynamic is particularly pronounced in Georgia. Previously recognised as a regional leader due to its pro-European orientation and multiple agreements with the European Union, Georgia has recently experienced increased Russian pressure and subsequent democratic backsliding.

As Georgia distances itself from Europe, China has emerged as a significant alternative, positioning itself as a pragmatic economic partner. A comprehensive reassessment of the Eastern Partnership is necessary; otherwise, the European Union risks diminishing its influence in a region critical to its security. The European Union must transition from a passive observer to an assertive geopolitical actor within its neighbourhood.

Within this context, the South Caucasus, as a key component of the Eastern Partnership, holds strategic significance for Europe's broader geopolitical landscape. The joint statement by the Presidents of the European Commission and the European Council following their July meeting with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan can be interpreted as a deliberate EU effort to advance its interests in the region. In today's Caucasian context, where authoritarianism is gaining ground, Armenia's engagement with Europe and deeper regional cooperation with the EU, including consultations on security and defence, highlight the South Caucasus' importance for shared Eastern security.

Moreover, Russia's invasion of Ukraine appears to have altered the Eastern Partnership policy, which was originally conceived as a means of promoting economic integration and regional stability. The war revealed that this agreement could also have a strategic and security dimension, as developments in the region go beyond the issue of Europe's peripheral neighbourhood.

The changes that have led to this are not limited to developments in Ukraine, but extend more broadly across the region. These include the granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia (though Georgia's commitment to its pro-integration path remains contested); Armenia's pursuit of an openly pro-European policy and its efforts to deepen relations with Europe as it gradually disengages from Russia; and the persistence of entrenched authoritarian regimes in Belarus and Azerbaijan, alongside Georgia's own democratic backsliding. Together, these dynamics highlight the enduring significance of the Eastern Partnership, not as a peripheral initiative or a side project, but as part of Europe's strategic environment.

Russia's well-known playbook

The war in Ukraine and Russia's demands against a sovereign state demonstrate that Moscow fully understands the power of unresolved conflicts and disputed territories as levers of influence. By occupying

Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Russia is not only asserting territorial claims but also exerting psychological pressure, a reminder that it can destabilise the region at any moment. Transnistria in Moldova serves a similar function, keeping Chişinău vulnerable to Moscow's interference.

Yet territorial conflicts alone are not sufficient for the Kremlin. Russia also employs disinformation, energy coercion, and hybrid interventions as strategic tools. Moscow orchestrates campaigns that depict the European Union as weak and unreliable, disseminated by local political elites aligned with Russian interests. These efforts foster persistent instability and disorder in several neighbouring countries. Consequently, the European Union must demonstrate robust resilience in response.

China's subtle advance

China, meanwhile, pursues a distinct approach compared to Russia. While Russia actively destabilises the region, China seeks to position itself as an alternative partner across multiple sectors. Beijing is gradually expanding its economic influence in the South Caucasus, with Chinese companies participating in major projects in Georgia, including logistics and energy development. China promotes itself as a driver of modernisation in the region.

However, China is not replacing Russia, but rather filling the traditional role of the European Union, which has long been associated with modernisation and reform in the region. While Europe hesitates, China is not wasting time and is offering alternative futures, gradually pushing the EU aside.

EaP security through the South Caucasus

The outcome of the war in Ukraine will have a direct impact on the South Caucasus. It would be a strategic mistake to sideline this region and treat it as a mere periphery of Europe. The South Caucasus holds significant importance for the EU, particularly as an energy and transit corridor. Reducing Europe's dependence on Russian supplies relies on the Southern Gas Corridor and the Middle Corridor. Diversification of supply is crucial in the context of the war in Ukraine, making the region's stability inseparable from the EU's own energy security.

The South Caucasus also shapes the security of the Black Sea region. To take Georgia as an example: an insecure Georgia leads to an insecure Black Sea. The stability of the eastern coast is vital for both the EU and NATO, especially as Russia seeks to militarise the sea.

Instability in the South Caucasus also risks broader spillover effects: forced migration, organised crime, and political radicalisation. The European security order extends to the Eastern Partnership countries, and even one weak link can undermine the stability of the union.

For this reason, the EU must think seriously about its role as a geopolitical actor. The Eastern Partnership could serve as a test. In the context of the war in Ukraine, EaP policy should increasingly emphasise security cooperation, resilience, and cyber defence. At the same time, China is becoming a fairly growing competitor of the EU, diminishing the EU's relative role.

Equally important, the EU needs to invest not only in governments but also in civil society, young leaders, and independent media. As the Georgian government is revealing its role as a puppet controlled by the

Kremlin, promoting Russian narratives, civil society remains one of the EU's most reliable allies. Supporting these actors strengthens democratic resilience and counteracts both Russian and Chinese soft power.

The time has come for the EU to recognise that the Eastern Partnership is no longer a peripheral initiative. It has moved to the forefront of the European security order. Russia destabilises, China displaces, and Europe cannot afford to remain a bystander in its own strategic neighbourhood. The EU's credibility as a geopolitical actor will be judged by whether it can defend and renew the Eastern Partnership, not merely as a policy idea but as a practical strategy.

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