



Europe's Unfinished East

By David Dondua

The countries in the eastern part of Europe will influence the future security situation in Europe. Disinformation Campaigns coming from Moscow prove that Russia's expansion is not limited to military action. Von David Dondua

Europe can no longer rely on the arrangements that kept it safe and prosperous for decades. The years of relatively cheap Russian gas and discounted American security guarantees are behind it, and neither is coming back on the old terms. What comes next will depend on whether Europe is prepared to build its own foundations in energy, defence and institutional resilience. But there is another question that is just as important: where does Europe end?

The answer cannot simply be found on the current borders of the European Union or NATO. Europe's eastern frontier is also a security frontier. It runs through countries whose future is still contested, whose institutions are under pressure, and whose security cannot yet be taken for granted.

THE ROLE OF THE EASTERN PARTNERS

Ukraine is at the centre of this challenge. Moldova is trying to move towards Europe under sustained pressure. Armenia has begun, cautiously, to look for a different relationship with Europe. Georgia shows what can happen when a European-oriented country is gradually weakened from within.

Securing this frontier is not an act of generosity towards Europe's eastern neighbours. It is in Europe's own interest. If the countries on its eastern edge remain exposed to military aggression, political coercion and manipulation, the entire continent remains vulnerable.

A century ago, Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi launched the Pan-Europa movement from Vienna. He drew Europe's eastern border at the Soviet frontier and imagined a Europe united beyond the divisions that had brought the continent to the brink of catastrophe. The line he drew has moved several times since. The political map has changed, and the institutions of European integration have expanded beyond what could have been imagined in his time.

But one question has remained: how far does the European project extend, and what happens to the countries left on its eastern side?

Today, that frontier should not be understood simply as a line on a map. It is a political and security frontier. It is where European institutions, values and models of government meet a system that

seeks to weaken them. Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia are not peripheral to this process. They are the testing ground for the principles that define Europe itself. Therefore, they should be considered not just as neighbours, but as co-authors of Europe's future order.

SUPPORT OF UKRAINE IS NOT A CHARITY

Ukraine is the clearest demonstration of what is at stake. It's not only a struggle over Ukraine's territory and sovereignty. It is also a test of whether borders in Europe can still be changed by force, and whether a country can choose its political and strategic direction without being punished for doing so.

What happens to Ukraine will therefore shape more than its own future.

A stable and sovereign Ukraine would strengthen Europe's eastern flank and give the continent strategic depth that it has lacked for decades. A weakened, divided or permanently insecure Ukraine would leave a large space between Russia and the rest of Europe exposed to continuing military and political pressure.

The consequences would not stop at Ukraine's borders. Russia's war has already demonstrated how quickly instability spreads across the Black Sea, how attacks on infrastructure can affect European interests far beyond the battlefield, and how military pressure can be combined with cyberattacks, disinformation, economic leverage and political influence.

Ukraine, in addition to defending its own territory, is already contributing to European security and is therefore an integral part of the European security environment.

This assumption matters. If Ukraine is treated simply as a country in need of European assistance, the relationship remains one-sided. If Ukraine is acknowledged as part of Europe's own security, then supporting its sovereignty becomes a European interest rather than an act of charity.

The same logic applies, although in different ways, to the countries around it.

Ukraine and Moldova opened EU accession negotiations in 2024, less than two years after receiving candidate status. Ukraine did so while fighting a full-scale war on its territory. Moldova has been pursuing reforms while facing sustained political and economic pressure from Moscow. Their progress demonstrates that the European project can still offer a clear political direction even under extremely difficult conditions.

But it also shows why security and integration cannot be separated. Reforms need institutions capable of surviving pressure. Political choices need to be protected from coercion. And countries moving towards Europe need to believe that Europe will remain engaged when the pressure becomes difficult.

NETWORKS OF INFLUENCE TO CONTROL COUNTRIES

Georgia offers a different lesson. It received EU candidate status in December 2023. Since then, that path has sharply deteriorated. In November 2024, the government suspended the accession process, and subsequent legislation and political measures have increasingly restricted civil society and independent media.

But it's not just Georgia's story. Its experience shows how Russia can weaken a European-oriented country without launching a new war.

In August 2008, Russian forces occupied 18 per cent of Georgia's territory, but it did not bring Moscow the political result it wanted. It neither changed the government in Tbilisi nor reoriented Georgian society away from the West. Over the years that followed, however, a different kind of pressure proved more effective and much cheaper.

Russia did not need to control every institution directly. Its cognitive operations operated through networks of influence within Georgia. State-aligned media amplified anti-Western narratives and questioned the value of closer ties with Europe and the West. Political and economic influence reached into public institutions. Distrust of the EU and NATO was cultivated and reinforced by domestic actors. Over time, what began as external pressure became part of Georgia's own political debate. And none of this required a soldier to cross the border.

That is what makes the Georgian case important beyond Georgia itself. Military aggression is visible. Cognitive and political warfare is much harder to identify and, harder still, to counter once it has become part of domestic political life. One can sanction tanks. But what happens when the weapon is a narrative?

HYBRID THREATS COMING FROM RUSSIA

Armenia, which is under the same kind of cognitive pressure and hybrid threats from Russia, is making a genuine effort to deepen its European ties and cautiously reorient its foreign policy toward the EU. It shows that even states historically close to Russia can move toward European integration when supported with credible incentives.

Although Azerbaijan is not seeking formal integration into the EU, its relations with Russia have deteriorated, placing the country under increased pressure. The prospects for an Armenia–Azerbaijan settlement underscore the strategic importance of the South Caucasus. Ensuring the region's political and economic stability is vital to European security, as it serves not only as a trade and energy corridor but also as a key strategic zone. Sustained European engagement is crucial to maintaining stability, countering external pressures, and integrating the South Caucasus into Europe's long-term strategic framework.

Russia's methods are not confined to the South Caucasus. State-aligned narratives, political influence and attempts to discredit Western institutions can be found across Europe. EU member states are not automatically protected from them simply because they are inside the Union. NATO membership does not stop a hostile narrative from reaching voters, nor does Article 5 provide an answer to a captured media environment or a political system gradually being turned against its own European commitments.

GEORGIA OFFERS A WARNING TO EUROPE

Georgia therefore offers a warning to Europe as much as to its own neighbours. If Russia can push a European-oriented country away from its declared course without paying a significant price, the lesson is not limited to Tbilisi. It tells Moscow that targeted political pressure can achieve what military force cannot.

This is why the security of Europe's eastern frontier cannot be understood only in military terms.

A NEW EUROPEAN SECURITY ORDER

The war in Ukraine ended the security environment that Europe had lived with since the end of the Cold War. Now Europe has to build a security order that reflects the reality it now faces.

That means making aggression against Europe's eastern neighbours costly enough to deter further attempts to change borders or political choices by force. It also means protecting countries from the less visible forms of pressure that can undermine their institutions without crossing a border.

This does not mean that Europe should prepare for permanent confrontation with Russia or close every possible channel of communication. There will eventually be questions that require engagement. But engagement should not be confused with the return of the old relationship. Europe can keep channels open while maintaining a firm position on the security of its eastern neighbours.

And the question of Russia itself cannot be avoided. A lasting European security order will ultimately depend on what kind of Russia emerges from the present confrontation. Without meaningful change in Moscow, any premature return to normal relations risks rewarding precisely the behaviour Europe is trying to deter.

The practical position for Europe is therefore not complicated, even if it is politically difficult: support Ukraine, stand behind Moldova, support Armenia, do not abandon Georgian society, invest in the Black Sea/South Caucasus, strengthen the resilience of European institutions, and make clear that pressure against one part of Europe is a concern for all of Europe.

EUROPE HAS NOT FINISHED BUILDING ITSELF

This brings us back to the question of what it means to belong to Europe. Membership is one answer. EU accession is important because it provides a framework of laws, institutions and rights. NATO membership provides another form of security. But neither institution alone defines the whole European project.

What connects Ukraine's resistance, Moldova's reform, Georgia's retreat and Armenia's cautious opening is a broader question: can countries on Europe's eastern frontier determine their own future without being forced to accept somebody else's will?

That is a European question. Europe has not finished answering it. This is especially important at a time when Europe is being forced to take greater responsibility for its own security. Strategic autonomy cannot stop at the EU's external border if instability on the other side of that border can still reach the continent through war, migration pressure, cyberattacks, disinformation, political influence or attacks on critical infrastructure.

A secure Europe therefore needs a secure eastern frontier. That does not mean drawing a new permanent line across the continent. Nor does it mean promising immediate membership to every country that wants closer relations with Europe. It means recognising that Europe's security cannot be separated from the security and political freedom of the countries immediately to its east.

Coudenhove-Kalergi's map is a century old. The borders have changed many times since he drew it. But the idea behind the Pan-Europa movement remains relevant: Europe's security and political identity are inseparable.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG David Dondua beschreibt Europas Osten nicht als bloße geografische Grenze, sondern als politische und sicherheitspolitische Frontlinie. Uk raine, Moldau, Georgien und Armenien seien deshalb keine peripheren Nachbarn, sondern Mitgestalter der künftigen europäischen Ordnung. Am deutlichsten zeige die Ukraine, dass die Sicherheit dieser Staaten unmittelbar mit der Sicherheit Euro pas verbunden ist. Zugleich macht Georgien sichtbar, dass russischer Einfluss nicht nur militärisch wirkt: Desinformation, politische Einfluss nahme und hybride beziehungsweise kognitive Operationen können die europäische Orientierung ei nes Landes schrittweise von innen

schwächen. Dondua folgert daraus, dass europäische Integration und Sicherheit nicht getrennt gedacht werden können. Europa müsse die Ukraine unterstützen, Moldau und Armenien politisch absichern, die georgische Gesellschaft nicht aufgeben und sein Engagement im Schwarzen Meer und im Südkaukasus verstärken. Eine neue europäische Sicherheitsordnung brauche sowohl glaubwürdige Abschreckung als auch institutionelle Resilienz. Strategische Autonomie könne daher nicht an den Außengrenzen von EU oder NATO enden: Europas eigene Sicherheit hängt auch von der politischen Freiheit und Stabilität seiner östlichen Nachbarn ab.



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