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Tinatin Akhvlediani

Geopolitical and Security Concerns of the EU's Enlargement to the East: The Case of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia

Russia's unprovoked and unjustified full-scale invasion of Ukraine has significantly changed the geopolitical circumstances on the European continent and is also importantly reshaping the EU's enlargement policy. The so-called Associated Trio countries – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – have been gradually integrated into the EU since concluding their Association Agreements back in 2014. Yet, it was the outbreak of the war that created the momentum for Ukraine, and afterwards Moldova and Georgia, to apply for EU membership. The European Council gave high priority to discuss the EU membership applications of the Trio and based on the Opinions of the European Commission, the Council has granted candidacy to Ukraine and Moldova, and laid down a list of priorities for Georgia to fulfil before receiving candidate status (European Council, 2022). With this step, the EU has moved the three states from its neighbourhood into its enlargement policy framework.

This contribution briefly reviews the current state of the Trio countries in terms of the accession criteria, discusses security and geopolitical implications of the EU's enlargement to the East and illustrates how the enlargement policy could be a useful tool for the EU to coordinate its foreign and security policy, become a stronger geo-political actor and promote European values and democracy in its immediate neighbourhood and beyond.

Accession criteria

In line with the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the EU is committed to integrate “any European state which respects [European] values and is committed to promoting them” (Article 49, TEU). The so-called Copenhagen criteria further outlines three conditions for EU membership: political, economic and institutional criteria. For many sceptics of the EU's Eastern enlargement, the question is whether Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia can satisfy

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these criteria. It should be noted here that meeting these criteria is not foreseen by the time of submitting the EU membership application and receiving candidacy, but by the time of the accession, which is usually a lengthy and complex process. In the framework of the EU's current enlargement policy, this would imply opening and closing all 35 chapters covering political, economic and institutional criteria.

The Trio countries, however, have solid grounds to embark on this challenging journey. This is due to the fact that the Trio countries have had Association Agreements (AAs) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) in place since 2014.¹ With their deep and comprehensive nature, the AAs and DCFTAs are more ambitious agreements than the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) that the Western Balkan countries have with the EU. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that according to the opinions of the European Commission (2022), the Trio have solid grounds for meeting accession criteria.² It is due to the progress made by the Trio countries towards approximating the EU acquis and to coming in line with EU policies that Ukraine and Moldova have satisfactory (and Georgia – a positive track record) implementation of the AAs and DCFTAs.

The main concerns around fulfilling the accession criteria refer to the political criteria, including the incomplete rule of law and democratic reforms, routing out corruption and informal governance, and protection of human rights. These challenges are not new to the fragile democracies that the Trio countries represent, but rather they are also challenges for some of the EU member states (for example, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania). This only highlights that working on the EU fundamentals requires continued efforts of both the EU member states as well as the candidate countries, otherwise they could be slowly eroded and even abandoned. Having this in mind, granting candidacy to the Trio could serve as a systemic incentive for them in undertaking needed reforms. From the EU's side, closely monitoring the progress towards reaching the accession criteria could be the efficient way to tie the candidate countries to the reform path and deliver clear guidance on how to move forward. In this direction,

1 The EU's Association Agreements with Georgia and Moldova have been provisionally in force since 2014 and for Ukraine since 2016.

2 See also Emerson et al. (2022).

Opinions of the Commission on the membership application of the Trio already provide a good starting point by listing the key priorities for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

European security

While raising questions about the effects of the enlargement policy on European security, the EU should carefully consider whether it is ready to witness Russia's military invasions and all of their consequences ever again in its neighbourhood. Russia's military invasion of Georgia back in 2008, followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea, the outbreak of war in Donbas in 2014 and now Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine should make it clear that the EU can no longer live in peace while witnessing wars on its doorstep. As rightly pointed out by the EU's Strategic Compass, Russia's hostile interference and extensive use of military instruments against Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia compromise their stability and their democratic processes and have direct implications for EU security (Akhvlediani, 2022). It is true that the EU cannot offer security guarantees to the Trio countries before they become full-fledged EU member states, but bringing them closer under the enlargement policy framework already delivers a strong political message to Russia that the EU is committed to restoring peace on the European continent.

By sharing a border with the EU, Ukraine and Moldova offer a direct glimpse of the EU's security threats. Georgia, having no land border with the EU, attracts doubts from the sceptics who suggest breaking up the Trio based on geographical grounds (Gijs, 2022). But Georgia still belongs to the EU's immediate neighbourhood and moreover, it is extremely vulnerable to Russian invasion due to the fact that it shares a long border with Russia and that one-fifth of its territory is under Russian occupation. By leaving Georgia behind, the EU risks the outbreak of Russia's new wars against an associated country that, unlike Azerbaijan, is not an autocracy and does not belong to the Eurasian Economic Union like Armenia and Belarus. Therefore, to signal to Russia that it must stop invading countries that have clearly made their European choice, the EU should support Georgia in fulfilling the priorities for receiving candidacy. And the sooner it is done, the more it will help to avoid the outbreak of new wars against associated states on the EU's doorstep.

The enlargement policy could also help the EU to coordinate its foreign and security policies. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has already united EU member states around the EU's strategic goals and threats to its security. It pressed them to deal with the issues that needed to be addressed years ago, when witnessing Russia's previous

military invasions. It was the lack of common foreign and security policy that has made the EU highly dependent on Russian energy supplies and even contributed to building Putin's war chest by increasing energy imports from Russia (Akhvlediani and De Groen, 2022). The war has finally pressed EU member states to act together to impose unprecedented sanctions against Russia and to take steps towards reducing the EU's dependence on Russian energy supplies (Meister and Jalilvand, 2022).

Unanimity rule has been making the EU's decision making slow and difficult, as each and every member state has veto powers at its disposal. But the Union did succeed in granting candidacy to Ukraine and Moldova, and recognising Georgia's European perspective. By not granting the Trio countries the perspective to become members of the Union, the EU would have made another strategic mistake that would have compromised its security and its aspirations to be a stronger geopolitical player on the world stage. And the fact that the EU member states could unite around granting membership perspective to the Trio indicates that the enlargement policy could still be an important tool to make the Union stronger in coordinating its foreign and security policies. However, as the deadlocked accession process with the Western Balkans indicates (Fouéré, 2022), the EU's enlargement policy has had major setbacks and limitations under unanimity rule. The EU should address these setbacks in order to revitalise and reform (Emerson et al., 2021) its enlargement policy, a soft but powerful tool for coordinating the EU's foreign and security policy.

Being a geopolitical actor

The EU has been aspiring to be a geopolitical actor in its neighbourhood. Yet, as this refers to the contested neighbourhood with Russia, the EU's geopolitical engagement has been importantly shaped and even guided by Russia's military moves. It was Putin's invasion of Georgia in 2008 that mobilised the EU to launch its Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy in 2009. The EaP, however, lacked a security dimension and most importantly an end goal, a tangible long-term objective. This made the EU's engagement rather ambiguous with its Eastern neighbours and did not give a clear signal to Russia to end its military invasions of its neighbours. Meanwhile, the EaP states, in their search for security, have pursued different political paths and have made different choices in their strategic alliances. Belarus and Armenia have strengthened their ties with Russia through their membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. After hijacking the presidential elections in 2020, Lukashenko abandoned the EaP framework (BelTA, 2021). Meanwhile, Azerbaijan, by pursuing autocracy, has distanced itself from key European values, making it

very difficult to strike a new agreement with the EU. Only the Trio countries have stayed committed to their European choice and took a step forward by concluding the AAs with the EU back in 2014. This step caused the Euromaidan uprising, the outbreak of the war in Donbas and Russia's annexation of Crimea back in 2014. Yet, despite the strong commitment to their European choice and the progress made on the implementation of the AAs, the EU has been reluctant to distinguish the three states from the rest of the EaP countries. It was Putin's war that pressed the EU to consider putting forward EU membership perspectives for the Trio countries and granting candidacy to Ukraine and Moldova.

This short history only highlights that the EU has been a weak geopolitical player, reacting to Russia's military moves rather than proactively engaging with its neighbours and giving a clear signal to Russia to stop destabilising the region. Against this background, putting forward the EU membership perspectives to the Trio countries is a promising turning point for the EU towards becoming a stronger geopolitical actor in line with its Treaty commitments and aspirations. Its assistance to Ukraine to survive and win the war against Russia, its support to Moldova to speed up needed reforms and to Georgia to fulfil conditions for receiving candidacy sooner than later will shed more light on the degree of the EU's geopolitical activeness in its immediate neighbourhood.

Promoting democracy

It is the Treaty that requires the EU to integrate any European state which respects European values and is committed to promoting them (Article 49, TEU). With this in mind, granting candidacy to Ukraine was a moral imperative for the EU as a way of showing its support to Ukrainians who are now dying in the fight against autocracy, showing their unwavering commitment to European values and democracy.

Similar to the EU's enlargement and security policies, promoting democracy in the disputed neighbourhood with Russia also has a strong geopolitical dimension. Looking at the paths taken by Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine to build democratic states illustrates that the strong will of people leads to internal transformation, setting a strong foundation for democracy. Yet, it is geopolitics that allows democracy to survive and prosper. Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia and in Ukraine back in 2003 and 2004 respectively, and the Twitter Revolution in Moldova in 2009 were illustrations of such strong public will that could lead to internal transformation, laying a cornerstone for building democracy in the Association Trio countries. Yet, further progress on democratic devel-

opment has since been largely dependent on geopolitics. This is because the Trio countries co-exist with democratic and autocratic powers in the contested neighbourhood between the EU and Russia. While the EU, in line with its Treaty, has been promoting European values and democracy in its neighbourhood, Russia has been pursuing military invasions to stop democratic development in the three states. In such, democracy could be fostered as much as Russia's military invasions could allow and as much as the EU could show its strong support for the Trio (Akhvlediani, 2022).

Unlike Russia that has been exploiting its military power to stop its neighbours' democratic transformation, the EU has soft but powerful tools to foster democracies in the Trio: its neighbourhood and enlargement policies. The EU's Eastern neighbourhood policy, embodied in the EaP initiative, has already led to an emergence of the Trio, and now it is the enlargement policy that needs to show prospects for democratic developments in the Trio. With this in mind, granting candidacy to Ukraine and Moldova shows the EU's commitment to act in line with its Treaty obligations and to actively promote European values and democracy in its immediate neighbourhood and beyond. Failing to grant the European perspectives and candidacy to the Trio would only have signalled to Russia that military invasions win the disputed neighbourhoods between the EU and Russia, and that autocracy can prevail by force over democratic values.

Together with Ukraine and Moldova, including Georgia among candidate countries should further reinforce that the EU stands with the neighbours who fight and die for their commitment to European choice and democracy building. Georgia has its homework to do and as soon as it shows progress in fulfilling priorities put forward in the opinion of the Commission, candidacy should follow as this is the only way to shield the democratic process in the country from the security threats posed by Russia's invasions and state capture by Russian-backed oligarchs (see Cenusa, 2018). Otherwise, all of the EU's efforts within the past decade to help Georgia build a democracy will be lost to Russia and its autocratic rule in the region.

Conclusions

Russia's military interventions in the EU's Eastern neighbours within the past decades followed by its full-scale invasion of Ukraine now once again underline that Russia's hostile interferences compromise the democratic processes in the EU's immediate neighbourhood and have direct implications for the EU's security. To this end, the EU's efforts to clarify its engagement with its Associated Trio countries by moving them from the neighbourhood to

the enlargement policy framework delivers a strong political message to Russia that the EU is committed to restoring peace on the European continent. This move is also promising for the EU to become a stronger geopolitical actor in its Eastern neighbourhood and to promote European values by shielding democratic processes in the Trio countries from constant security threats and military invasions of Russia.

Together with strengthening European security, the enlargement policy could also become a powerful tool to unite the EU member states around the EU's strategic goals and aspirations and to help in coordinating its foreign and security policies. Although for this to materialise, the EU should address the major setbacks and limitations of its enlargement policy, otherwise the application of this soft but powerful tool will remain limited under the unanimity rule, reaching new stalemates, instead of coordinating EU foreign and security policy.

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