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Future Imperfect: The EU and the Eastern Partners in 2022

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Summary

The next Eastern Partnership summit will be held in Brussels on 15 December, six months after Belarus suspended its participation in the project. The European Union has spoken of a 'renewed agenda' for the initiative based around a handful of long-term goals. How bright does the future look for the EU's flagship neighbourhood policy?

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The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) think tank recently published an insightful research paper on attitudes among young foreign policy practitioners in the original six Eastern Partnership countries. The authors rightly included Belarus in their research because one hopes the door remains open to Belarus's re-engagement with the initiative in the future. Reading through their report, based on interviews with more than one hundred diplomats and other practitioners aged between 25 and 45, it strikes me that there are three broad challenges facing the EU and its Eastern Partners.

The Geopolitical Challenge

The first challenge is meeting geopolitical expectations. Among the key findings from the ECFR research is that young foreign policy practitioners in the Eastern Partner states want to see the EU carry more geopolitical weight. Especially in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, there are positive perceptions of the EU but doubts about its effectiveness in the region.

The EU itself has long spoken of being 'more geopolitical': Commission President Ursula von der Leyen came into office pledging a 'geopolitical Commission' (page 7) and High Representative Josep Borrell, during his confirmation hearing, had said the EU must learn 'the language of power' (7m 50s). More recently, after the debacle of US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, many in the EU picked up on ambitions of 'strategic autonomy' for the continent. The president of the European Council announced that 2022 would be 'the year of European defence' and President Emmanuel Macron of France, whose country will hold the rotating presidency of the Council in the first half of 2022, will convene an EU summit on defence matters.

But as the European Council's president acknowledged, military capabilities will remain secondary in the EU's values-first foreign policy agenda. The EU institutions have little choice in the matter. As always, the EU stumbles on the unwillingness of member states to cede greater control of high politics and security affairs to Brussels. The debate on strategic autonomy, under many different names and guises, is as old as integration on the continent itself: it begins with the failure of the European Defence Community in the 1950s. The failure to grant competence to EU institutions on these matters limits the EU's prospects as a geopolitical actor.

The Values Challenge

Unable to meet the demands of geopolitics, the EU doubles down on its values. The extent to which the EU's values presently align with the political reality in the partner states is, at best, mixed. The second challenge for the Eastern Partnership's future success therefore is to ensure that doubling down on values does not outpace demand in Eastern Partner societies.

In March 2021 the EU identified five goals for the Eastern Partnership's future, reiterated in July's announcement of a 'renewed agenda'. The EU's promotion of, and support for, political and economic liberalism beyond its borders – including democracy, the rule of law and free trade – has always been central to its liberal foreign policy. Concerns for promoting what might be termed social liberalism have risen up the agenda more recently. One of the Eastern Partnership goals identified in March was for 'resilient, fair and inclusive societies'; come July the reference was to 'fair, gender-equal and inclusive societies'.

Inclusiveness is an important issue. The ECFR report found that foreign policy practitioners in the Eastern Partnership states had concerns for gender-equality in particular (Moldova was an outlier here since respondents did not perceive women were limited by a glass ceiling). But a focus on liberal social values is not risk-free for the

Eastern Partnership initiative, especially as intra-EU inclusivity concerns seep into its foreign policy. The firmer the EU pushes inclusivity, the greater the risk of running foul of the conservatism of Eastern Partnership states' societies.

Take Ukraine. Many Ukrainian people have clearly set their sights westwards although there remains considerable prejudice against homosexuality in society. Pew Research Centre polling has found a slight decline in the acceptance of homosexuality over the past two decades (from a very low baseline: see page 18 of this report). Georgia, another country that has shown strong commitments to a European path, also grapples with inclusivity issues. Scepticism towards western institutions and 'western' values is far greater in Armenia and Azerbaijan (as well as Belarus) and the potential for greater frictions with the EU is acute. Pushed too quickly, governments in these states may reassess their involvement in the initiative and amplify the illiberal tendencies seen within some central and eastern EU member states.

The Leadership Challenge

Social values mark territory where Russia's leaders think they can triumph over the EU in the region. As Russia asserts its foreign policy positions more forcefully, the EU faces another challenge concerning its own leadership. For many outside the bloc, the most visible face of the EU has not been the heads of the EU institutions, but Angela Merkel. The EU has benefitted from the German chancellor's leadership time and time again, including on foreign and neighbourhood policy issues.

Merkel is renowned for her tact in smoothing tensions among member states. Equally as important, Germany's geographical position means it is deeply invested in eastern Europe economically and politically. While Germany may not have been the most prominent state on Eastern Partnership matters, its overall influence has steered EU neighbourhood policy more generally. Whoever becomes Germany's next chancellor looks unlikely to possess anything near Merkel's gravitas on the international stage.

There are broader challenges about leadership of the Eastern Partnership. The ECFR report cites one Moldovan diplomat deploring the current 'pupil and teacher' relationship as what the report's authors describe as 'a source of irritation' about dealing with the EU. Indeed, while the EU buzzword in recent years has been for 'resilience-building' in neighbourhood policy, another popular notion appears absent from the five goals heralding the renewed agenda. 'Local ownership' – a notion that originates in the literature of peace operations – would mean ceding greater control to the Eastern Partners.

The EU has shown itself willing to commit financial and diplomatic resources to its east and these should sustain the Eastern Partnership project. Going into December's summit, the Eastern Partners will be looking at how closely the EU's goals continue to fit their ambitions. One key question, then, is how willing the EU is to grant local ownership in a renewed agenda and whether officials in Brussels and EU member states, as well as citizens in Eastern Partner states, will be happy with where that might lead.

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