



TRENDS – CHALLENGES – RECOMMENDATIONS

Let in the light, Bear!

Future of the EU's Eastern Policy

January 2025

Bartłomiej Kot

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Future of the EU's Eastern Policy

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Introduction

The European Union's (EU) Eastern policy is a multifaceted construct encompassing the Eastern Partnership (EaP), EU's Russia policy, and elements of the enlargement strategy. This complexity reflects the intertwined goals of fostering stability, democracy, and economic alignment in Eastern Europe while addressing the direct and systemic threats posed by Russian aggression. The events of 2022-2024 period have necessitated a transformation of the EU's approach, shifting its emphasis from normative influence to a geopolitical strategy prioritizing security and regional stability.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 stands as a turning point for the EU's Eastern policy. This aggression dismantled long-standing assumptions about the regional security order, compelling the EU to redefine its posture in Eastern Europe. The war has underscored the necessity of a robust security framework for the region, with the EU's need to address destabilizing Russian activities through enhanced security alignment with Eastern European partners. Moreover, ensuring the security of EU member states is possible only if the Union establishes itself as the dominant actor in its immediate neighbourhood.

However, the internal divisions among Eastern Partnership countries, shaped by both domestic politics and Russian interference, pose significant challenges. The idea of the EaP must now transition from a normative agenda focused on reforms and governance to a geopolitical initiative aimed at stabilizing the region and countering Russian aggression. Where Russia acts as the primary destabiliser – whether through

military activities or hybrid measures such as disinformation – the EU's role must be to stabilise the region and counteract Russian actions.

Security has emerged as the preeminent concern in the EU's Eastern policy. There is an urgent need to strengthen the security-focused offer for Eastern partners, encompassing military support, counter-disinformation efforts, and resilience against hybrid threats. This priority aligns with the vision articulated by the Polish Presidency in the EU Council in 2025. The recommendation to enhance this vision are also presented here by the author, who seeks to position Poland as a leader in the reshaped Eastern policy, with a clear focus on security and understanding of the geopolitical competition with Russia. Nevertheless, the danger lies in the tension between a Promethean vision of Eastern policy and Poland's ability to influence decisions of Germany and France, which view the European project as requiring institutional reformulation.

This paper is structured into three sections: identifying key trends, analyzing challenges, and presenting actionable recommendations. By exploring these dimensions, it seeks to chart a course for an effective and cohesive EU strategy in Eastern Europe. It concludes with forward-looking recommendations designed to persist beyond the active phase of military operations in Ukraine, reflecting the enduring nature of systemic rivalry with Russia: For the author recognizes that the current open rivalry is systemic in nature and will persist as long as Russia views the EU as a threat to its sphere of influence.

1

European Union's Eastern Policy: Trends, Challenges, and Recommendations

Identifying Key Trends in the EU's Approach to Eastern Partnership Countries

In Polish debates on international relations, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) occupies a distinctive position. It is frequently held as a benchmark for effective Polish foreign policy, reflecting the country's ability to identify a critical area of influence – Eastern Europe – and build a partnership with Sweden to amplify the initiative's political significance. This success extended to shaping the European Union's policy, and illustrates until today Poland's prominent and positive impact at the EU level. However, this perspective largely focuses on the conceptual phase of the EaP's inception, with less attention given to assessing the EU's effectiveness in achieving concrete outcomes over the fifteen years of this initiative's inclusion in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

Since its inception in 2009, the EaP has witnessed six summits and numerous ministerial meetings between the EU and partner states. The majority concluded with calls for tangible results, yet the EU's goals for the EaP have predominantly centred on "soft" issues such as engagement with civil society, promoting good governance, fostering environmental and climate resilience, and enhancing social inclusion. Criticism of the EaP's achievements often focuses on the negative developments within the political systems of its target states, citing

increased political, economic, and security instability, sluggish reforms, and democratic backsliding. Other concerns include ineffective and corrupt public administration, persistent influence of extra-political interest groups tied to business elites, and the destabilising role of Russia in the region.

The EaP's failure to achieve its political reform objectives is closely tied to the EU's relations with Moscow. The previously held belief that engaging Russia through trade could encourage alignment with EU values proved counterproductive, emboldening Vladimir Putin's government to exert imperial influence over states it considers within its sphere of influence, including EaP partners. This dynamic reflected an assumption that the EU would prioritise stable trade relations with Russia over uncertain and economically less lucrative Eastern European markets, particularly in the absence of consensus among European elites about extending EU membership to these countries.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a pivotal moment in reshaping the EU's approach to Eastern partners and its broader relationship with Russia. This event not only signalled the collapse of the post-war security order in Europe but also



Carl Bildt and Radosław Sikorski played a key role in initiating and developing the Eastern Partnership.

“The Eastern Partnership’s failure to achieve its political reform objectives is closely tied to the nature of the EU’s relations with Moscow pre-2022.”

necessitated a fundamental reassessment of EU objectives vis-à-vis Moscow. The EU’s *Strategic Compass* published in the wake of the invasion, explicitly identifies Russia as a “long-term and direct threat to European security.” This represents a decisive break from previous policies of economic engagement with Moscow, paving the way for a redefined approach to Eastern partners.

However, this shift also highlights the dual challenges facing the EU: overcoming the inertia of prioritising trade stability with Russia and addressing fears of escalating security risks or direct confrontation with the Kremlin. Although the *Strategic Compass* offers limited insight into a comprehensive vision for the EaP, it identifies two key trends: enhancing cooperation in defence and security and treating partnerships as integral to a strategy that addresses the increasing uncertainty of the global system.

Critique of the EaP’s Effectiveness and the Change that Comes with Russian Aggression

The Russian aggression against Ukraine also has immense consequences for the European Union’s perception of its own geopolitical position. Open rivalry, although not manifesting as direct military conflict between EU member states and Moscow, now constitutes an existential challenge for Brussels. The Union, which genuinely regards Russia as a global security threat, must also view it as the principal destructive factor against its own interests. It should therefore recognise the direct connection between the goals of Russian neo-imperial policy not only with the persistent maintenance or even territorial expansion of its sphere of influence, but also with the challenge posed to the ideological foundations of European

integration. These foundations undoubtedly include the ambition to expand.

To safeguard its position and to avoid political and economic marginalisation as a force incapable of opposing the aggressive policies of its primary adversary, the EU is compelled to treat its foreign policy as the main line of defence for the European way of life, standards, and values, including economic prosperity. The path to this lies in responding to two key needs of the candidate countries that are directly on the frontlines of Russian imperialism. These needs are: a credible enlargement policy and increased engagement in the sphere of security.

“Eastern Partnership countries must understand that the EU’s enlargement policy is not merely an offer of an economic miracle but a clear declaration linking their foreign and security policies with the interests of the entire EU.”

The vision of the EU held by the Eastern Partnership countries – losing its soft power due to internal crises (such as Brexit, rising populism, and illegal migration) – must shift to a vision of the EU as prepared for confrontation with Russia. For this reason, Brussels must not only make declarative changes but also fundamentally and enduringly transform its paradigm of relations with Moscow. It must prioritise its commitment to Eastern Europe in terms of security and the projection of its economic prosperity as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. The existing lack of focus on this part of the continent, which has resulted in multi-vector approaches and selective implementation of reforms by Eastern Partnership states, must be replaced with a credible security offer. At the same time, Eastern Partnership countries must understand that the EU’s enlargement policy

is not merely an offer of an economic miracle but a clear declaration linking their foreign and security policies with the interests of the entire EU. Achieving this requires active cooperation, not a lack of engagement or passivity.

EXISTING TRENDS:

- The reduction of the EU’s *soft power* among Eastern Partnership countries due to internal crises;
- Multi-vector and selective policies by Eastern Partnership states towards the EU’s offer. Increased influence of Russia;
- Lack of local leadership gaining politically from deepening reforms in the spirit of the EU’s offer.

CHANGES IN TRENDS:

- Increasing the importance of Eastern Europe for the existential position of the EU;
- Engaging in confrontation between Russia and the EU – potential for a lasting shift in the EU-Russia relationship paradigm.

THE NEED FOR CHANGE:

- Formulating a credible enlargement policy for Eastern Europe in connection with a security offer;
- Increasing the linkage between the foreign and security policies of Eastern Partnership countries and the interests of the EU.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a pivotal moment in reshaping the EU’s approach to Eastern partners and its broader relationship with Russia.



Division Among Eastern Partnership Countries Resulting from Internal Political Changes and Russia's Negative and Aggressive Policies

At its inception, the Eastern Partnership encompassed six countries located in Eastern Europe: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. These states are connected not only by their geographical position to the east of the current EU borders but also by a shared historical legacy stemming from their past within the Soviet Union. The offer extended to these countries was both political and economic in nature. However, prior to 2022, the European Union did not treat this initiative as a geopolitical tool but rather as a normative one. The EaP was an instrument to promote governance mechanisms akin to those of the EU, based on European values such as the rule of law, the elimination of corruption, and cooperation with civil society. On the one hand, delays in implementing reforms, uncertainty about pro-European tendencies, and a lack of national unity in pursuing the goal of European integration among potential candidates, negatively impacted the aspirations for membership. On the other hand, Brussels imposed its own limitations, stemming from its tendency to consider Moscow's ambitions to shape the political framework of the region. This approach

effectively positioned Russia as the central actor in the EU's Eastern policy, prioritising at least neutral relations with Moscow over ambitions for enlargement.

Notably, a similar trend could be observed in the 1990s regarding the pro-Atlantic aspirations of Central European countries seeking to join NATO. At the time, NATO member states often made their approval of membership aspirations dependent upon simultaneously codifying a partnership with Russia, thereby securing at least tacit consent from Moscow for the expansion. From this perspective, Poland's aspirations regarding both EU and NATO policies toward Eastern Europe have always stood out with distinctly different assumptions. They were rooted in an ideological foundation that placed principled emphasis on respecting the rights of states in the region to determine their own strategic choices.

After initial successes, exemplified by proceeding visa facilitation agreements with Eastern Partnership countries, further stages of closer relations with the EU, including political and trade agreements, were stalled. This was primarily due to the evolving geopolitical environment, characterised by increasingly negative interference from Russia in all six countries. This interference included extreme actions such as the active occupation of parts of Georgia's territory and military aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. The internal political situation in the EaP also played a role, frequently manifesting in selective implementation of the EU's normative offers. As a result, a lasting division emerged among the partners: those striving for closer ties with the EU and those relegated to a "second-tier partnership", or even suspended relations.

An extreme example in this context is Belarus. This country officially suspended its

“The EU's current willingness to use the accession mechanism to strengthen pro-European and anti-Russian tendencies in the Eastern Europe (...) reflects a greater openness to employing enlargement policy as a tool linked to security policy.”

participation in the Eastern Partnership in June 2021, with its regime not only openly violating democracy and human rights through repression of the opposition but also actively contributing to the destabilisation of NATO's and the EU's Eastern Flank and aiding Russia in its military actions in Ukraine. Consequently, in the case of Belarus, one can speak of an evolution from a partner to a state openly hostile to the European Union. A telling illustration of the deterioration in these relations is the fact that Poland's Presidency of the EU Council, in its objectives for 2025, equates Belarus with Russia in its descriptions of measures aimed at curbing post-imperial Russian policies in Central and Eastern Europe.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have a trio of countries: Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Their paths toward Europe underwent significant changes between 2022 and 2024 due to Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. This led Kyiv and Chişinău to begin accession negotiations and Tbilisi to attain candidate country status. However, even in this case, the actions of the Georgian government following the 2024 parliamentary elections, which were contrary to the fundamental values and principles of the EU, pose a threat of permanently severing progress on the country's path to EU membership. This is evidenced not only by statements from the EU side but also by the Georgian government's declaration to suspend accession talks.

The EU's current willingness to use the accession mechanism to strengthen pro-European and anti-Russian tendencies in the Eastern European countries targeted by the Eastern Partnership offer aligns fully with the aforementioned trend of changing the EU-Russia relationship paradigm. It also reflects a greater openness to employing enlargement policy as a tool linked to security policy.

RECOMMENDATION:

Taking an Individualised Approach to Eastern European Candidates within the EU Enlargement Policy

The central question arising from the existing division among Eastern Partnership countries is whether this initiative still makes sense and whether it should be reformulated to better reflect the realities of the current integration process. For each country, the European Union today sets markedly different objectives, shaped

“For each country, the European Union today sets markedly different objectives, shaped not only by the extent to which they have adopted the EU's normative legacy but also by geopolitical realities.”

not only by the extent to which they have adopted the EU's normative legacy but also by geopolitical realities.

For Ukraine and Moldova, which have commenced accession talks, the dynamics of their relations with the EU are fundamentally different from those observed in extreme cases such as Belarus. For Armenia and Azerbaijan, the focus should be on stabilising the situation resulting from the recent armed conflict between these states. In Georgia's case, however, far greater attention is drawn to the need to build relations with civil society rather than with the government, which seems to have definitively rejected the prospect of integration, generating legal issues stemming from its questionable electoral legitimacy.

While highlighting the geopolitical necessity of enlargement, it is also important not to overlook the strong commitment some EU member states have to decisive resolutions regarding the accession of Western Balkan countries. As in the case of the Eastern Partnership, the Western Balkans are also experiencing growing influence from actors hostile to the EU, dysfunctional political systems, corruption, and threats to Brussels' geopolitical position. An enlargement process that does not prioritise countries that have long been waiting for integration could be perceived by Hungary, Austria, or even Germany as a visible failure of the EU's policy in this area.

At the same time, a key issue for the EU's stance and that of its member states remains the linkage between integration and institutional reforms on matters such as the structure of the European Commission or the extension of qualified majority voting. The debate on potential treaty changes or other forms of institutional transformation significantly delays the timeline



Ukraine's accession would represent a massive undertaking for the EU across numerous fields: security, the impact on the single market, climate transformation, agriculture, cohesion assistance, and the need for institutional changes within the EU.

for enlargement, even for those Eastern European countries that are currently at the forefront of the EU accession queue.

From the perspective of the EU's geopolitical position concerning Eastern European countries, the necessity for a visible success in the area of enlargement is evident. Any alternative proposals, delays in the process despite progress in implementing reforms, or excuses based on the need for treaty reforms will be perceived in the region as additional factors undermining the EU's image and influence. At the same time, it is emphasised that the New Enlargement Agenda should not pursue shortcuts but must seriously consider the full spectrum of factors determining a country's accession to the EU, including, of course, issues of the rule of law and impacts on security.

In light of the above, it is necessary to seek opportunities for success in European integration within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, not only by focusing on those states currently more predisposed to it due to the political attention they attract from European capitals. It is also essential to consider how such decisions will affect the EU's geopolitical position, internal institutional structure, and decision-making processes. At the same time, any new EU member should serve as a tangible example for other

Eastern European countries, demonstrating that success is achievable through determination in implementing reforms and aligning foreign and security policies with EU directions. A continued "bloc" approach to enlargement may only push decisiveness further away, as countries that pose smaller economic, institutional, or geopolitical burdens for the EU will wait in line for the accession of their larger counterparts in the process.

Today, the discussion about Ukraine within the EU adds a new dynamic to the enlargement process, which also benefits Moldova, although it remains somewhat in the shadow of its politically more prominent partner. Ukraine's accession would represent a massive undertaking for the EU across numerous fields: security, the impact on the single market, climate transformation, agriculture, cohesion assistance, and the need for institutional changes within the EU. On the other hand, the Union may gain significantly from Ukraine's accession, not least due to access to key resources that Kyiv possesses.

In contrast to this complexity, Moldova, with its relatively small population, presents a different scenario. Its society, due to the widespread possession of Romanian passports, already frequently benefits from EU citizenship privileges. For Chişinău, even small-scale infrastructure projects by EU standards create significant and visible differences in how the EU's offer is perceived. Naturally, there is a need for continued focus on building the country's resilience, achieving energy independence from Russia, and critically, enhancing its defence capabilities as well as taking a creative approach to the reintegration of Transnistria. However, in the longer term, Moldova stands to benefit greatly from increased attention from Brussels. Nevertheless, Moldova's authorities also need to shift the narrative, moving beyond arguments centred on the "insignificance" of their country as the primary justification for accession. Instead, they should emphasise what Moldova can bring to the EU in terms of strengthening its geopolitical position.

RECOMMENDATION:

Creating a Concrete Role in EU's Eastern Policy for the European Political Community

The European Union's need to enhance its geopolitical influence has led to the creation of the European Political Community (EPC) as an

“The EU should also work on expanding its ability to extend geopolitical influence eastward by setting a strategic agenda for other partners, beyond the EaP. Poland can leverage its participation in the EPC for precisely this purpose.”

initiative to coordinate political efforts between the EU and other countries on the continent. This development is particularly relevant in the context of circumstances such as the EU’s new shape following Brexit, the security situation in Europe, and the previous failures of enlargement policy, all of which provide the EPC with potential to make an impact. The EPC is intended to address geopolitical needs, including neighbourhood stabilisation, accelerating enlargement, and promoting multilateralism.

However, the establishment of this platform has coincided with the need to address a critical question: does this initiative create an alternative to EU membership for countries for whom membership was a clear and specific goal on their path toward integration? On one hand, assurances from European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to countries in the accession process rule out the EPC as such an alternative. On the other hand, there is an ongoing debate about a model of gradual enlargement, in which aspiring countries would acquire membership rights in stages.

In light of the discussed changes in the perception of the Eastern Partnership as a tool of geopolitical influence, as well as the simultaneous stagnation the initiative has faced due to the division of its member states into different groups based on the intensity of their European integration processes, it is necessary to reflect on the

tangible significance of the European Political Community (EPC) in the context of the EU’s Eastern policy. Countries on the EU’s Eastern Flank, including Poland, remain strongly committed to the continuation of the Eastern Partnership as one of the key elements in bringing Eastern Europe closer to the EU, highlighting that much work remains to be done in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and in support of democratisation in Belarus. At the same time, the participation of Yerevan and Baku, as well as the invitation extended to representatives of the Belarusian opposition at EPC summits, demonstrates that this initiative also has a role to play in EU’s Eastern policy.

It should not be forgotten that the EPC is a broader framework, encompassing, among others, Turkey. While the need for strategic agreements with non-EU partners arises from similar needs to those addressed by the Eastern Partnership – promoting the EU’s geopolitical position and, to a lesser extent, its normative role – the EPC, by its very nature, has a wider scope. Its actions, if further defined, are unlikely to stem solely from Brussels’ ability to unilaterally impose its will on other partners but will rather be the result of broader consultations. At the same time, the process of enlargement has already demonstrated its impact on EU foreign policy as a tool for maximising the Union’s influence.

The development of the Eastern Partnership should focus on tailoring its offer to the needs of the participating states (e.g., building public administration capacities or integrating more closely with the EU energy market). However, the Union should also work on expanding its ability to extend geopolitical influence eastward by setting a strategic agenda for other partners, beyond the EaP. Poland can leverage its participation in the EPC for precisely this purpose, while ensuring that the prospect of EPC participation does not exclude or limit Eastern Europe’s potential accession to the EU.

Changing the Perception of the Eastern Partnership's Nature: From Normative Influence to Geopolitical Influence

The European Union's perception of its Eastern policy, as expressed through the Eastern Partnership, was largely shaped by the existing paradigm of relations between Brussels and Moscow. On one hand, the Union extended a transformative offer to Eastern European states, based on promoting normative solutions and a set of values as the foundation for closer ties. On the other hand, economic interests and connections between major EU players and Russia required respecting Moscow's objections regarding the nature and depth of the EU's policy. Open declarations of membership were replaced by rhetoric about "European aspirations." Notably, a similar paternalistic attitude was exhibited within NATO in response to concerns raised by Eastern Flank members about Russia's aggressive and imperial policies as a persistent trend in Eastern Europe.

Justice, security, and prosperity in the Western model, offered to Eastern partners, encountered resistance from Russia's imperial policy, which viewed the same region as its direct sphere of

influence. Russia's counteroffer ultimately evolved into the concept of the *Russian World*, even justifying military aggression to halt the advance of Western values and visions into territories that had been wrested from Moscow's immediate control after 1991. A clear example of this mindset was presented by Putin himself in his *Speech on the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, in which he explicitly accused the West of attempting to remove Ukraine from the Russian World, sever its economic ties with Russia, and bind it to the EU. At the same time, he asserted that "true sovereignty for Ukraine is only possible in partnership with Russia."

The situation escalated with Russia's war against Ukraine in 2014, which led to a cooling of relations between Brussels and Moscow. However, there remained a persistent hope of returning to the pre-Crimea annexation *status quo*, rooted in the perception of shared economic interests as a foundation for cooperation. In response to Moscow's longstanding grievances regarding the EU's expanding influence in Eastern Europe, the Union referred to international law and the principles of the European security order. Among the principles underpinning EU policy toward Russia were increasingly frequent references to the Minsk Agreements and a continual emphasis on readiness to further collaborate with Eastern European partners.

RECOMMENDATION:

The European Union Must Define Itself as a Geopolitical Actor that Provides Security to Partners in Eastern Europe

Until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU seemed unaware that Moscow's opposition to the Eastern Partnership stemmed from Russian willingness to engage in geopolitical rivalry in their shared neighbourhood. For Russia to perceive the EU's offer an intervention against its interests, it does not need to be explicitly geopolitical in nature. The normative offer of the Eastern Partnership, with its focus on combating informal interest groups, corruption,



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and weak institutions – tools Moscow exploits to exert influence on neighbouring states – is equally threatening to Russia’s position.

Nevertheless, Russia’s attack on Kyiv has fundamentally reshaped the challenge Brussels faces in Eastern Europe. Russia, now a direct threat not only to Eastern Partnership countries but also to EU member states, has entered into open competition with the Union. This has forced the EU to develop foreign and security policies rooted in geopolitical considerations rather than purely normative ones. Accordingly, the EU’s Eastern policy, including the Eastern Partnership, should be redefined under this framework.

The creation of initiatives like the European Political Community (EPC) demonstrates that the geopolitical nature of the EU is now widely recognised among European leaders. Ensuring the security of EU member states is possible only if the Union establishes itself as the dominant actor in its immediate neighbourhood. This need is reinforced by the outcome of the most recent U. S. presidential elections and Donald Trump’s aim to reduce America’s responsibility for European security, as well as the necessity

of providing Ukraine with security guarantees involving European states. Enlargement thus becomes not only an instrument for promoting normative values but also a means of building geopolitical strength and shaping Europe’s security offer for the region. Equally critical is the necessity to equip Eastern partners with effective mechanisms to enhance their security against both hybrid and kinetic actions by Russia, including sabotage and disinformation. The importance of the Eastern Partnership in this regard is underscored by the plans of Poland’s Presidency of the EU Council in 2025.

The greatest challenge for Poland and those EU states that consider an effective and ambitious Eastern policy as the foundation of their security, will be balancing the interests of candidate countries from different parts of the continent. Arguments regarding the unwillingness to accelerate the accession of Ukraine or Moldova before addressing the candidacies of the Western Balkans, or concerns about the security of Southern Europe, could undermine the cohesion of the enlargement agenda. On the other hand, it is difficult to expect the EU not to adopt a 360-degree approach, considering the nature of the crises it faces in its surrounding regions. Demonstrating Poland as a constructive partner, sensitive to the interests of other parts of the EU could be crucial, especially as Europe’s focus on Ukraine’s future may diminish if prolonged problems arise in its accession process – whether political, economic, or institutional in nature.

“Ensuring the security of EU member states is possible only if the Union establishes itself as the dominant actor in its immediate neighbourhood.”

The Priority of Security in European Eastern Policy

The issue of linking NATO and EU memberships has become particularly prominent during discussions about Ukraine's transatlantic aspirations, which have intensified as Kyiv prepares to join both organisations following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Ukraine's authorities, much like those of Poland and other Central European states in the past, perceive their civilisational choice to be part of the West through the dual lens of NATO and the EU. In this view, the European Union is seen as the guarantor of economic development and the provider of normative solutions, while NATO provides the foundation of security. However, the offers of both organisations are deeply interconnected, as a strong and stable state seeks to bolster investor confidence and governance predictability by ensuring its defence capabilities. Similarly, a robust economy underpins the sustainability of defence capabilities, and helps meeting NATO obligations for defence spending.

The assistance provided by both NATO and the EU to Ukraine in its fight against Russia has demonstrated the potential for collaboration between the two organisations. It has also highlighted their shared strategic principles from the perspective of member states' foreign policies. The existence of Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union further reinforces this connection. While this provision obligates member states to provide mutual assistance and support in the event of armed aggression, it is clear that Europe's actual security, along with the specific capabilities needed to ensure it, depends heavily on NATO. This reliance is, of course, a consequence of American defence capabilities accessible through the North Atlantic Alliance. At the same time, NATO membership should not serve as an excuse for EU states enjoying this privilege to neglect strengthening their own capabilities,

whether by enhancing domestic production for military needs or deepening cooperation among allies through joint armament projects.

Coupled with growing concerns among European leaders about a potential future reduction of U.S. engagement in European security, the importance of European states' ability to defend the continent is increasing. The need of providing security guarantees to a post-war Ukraine is equally significant. From the perspective of European Eastern policy, the goals and effectiveness of the EU's future approach to Eastern European states threatened by Russian imperialism will undoubtedly be shaped by the outcome of this war. The EU, engaged in open geopolitical rivalry with Russia, requires an effective security architecture for the continent.

Furthermore, in designing future enlargements, more attention should be given to preventing scenarios where enlargement may actually undermine security due to the premature admission of a state whose internal situation could destabilise the Union as a whole. The Eastern Partnership should therefore also focus on fostering security alignment, including strengthening the capacity of its partners to counter destabilising Russian activities such as disinformation.

RECOMMENDATION:

Strengthening the Security-Focused Offer for Eastern Partners

As Brussels' geopolitical position grows, it is essential to enhance the security dimension of its offer to Eastern European partners. Where Russia acts as the primary destabiliser – whether through military activities or hybrid measures such as disinformation – the EU's role must be to stabilise the region and counteract Russian actions. This has become evident during the war in Ukraine, where significant aid, including military capabilities, has been provided by the EU. This underlines the Union's transformation from a provider of normative solutions to an active geopolitical player.

“The Eastern Partnership should focus on fostering security alignment, including strengthening the capacity of its partners to counter destabilising Russian activities.”



Where Russia acts as the primary destabiliser – whether through military activities or hybrid measures such as disinformation – the EU’s role must be to stabilise the region and counteract Russian actions.

The European Union has so far provided substantial military assistance to Ukraine, including financing arms deliveries through the European Peace Facility, training Ukrainian armed forces under EUMAM Ukraine, and offering extensive logistical and humanitarian support. Continuing this support to build Ukraine’s defensive capabilities is critical for the future, even after the current phase of military operations concludes. In the long term, Ukraine will require weaponry meeting NATO standards, which it aspires to join, and the reform of Ukraine’s armed forces must continue, regardless of whether the membership timeline is shorter or longer. The reduced availability of spare parts and ammunition for Soviet-era equipment should encourage Poland to fill this gap by exporting Polish-made weaponry.

Eastern Partnership countries are particularly vulnerable to Russian actions, which target not only military activities (as seen with the invasion of Ukraine) but also destabilisation efforts in the energy sector and critical infrastructure. Moldova’s growing alignment with the EU has revealed how Russia leverages energy dependence to counter trends unfavorable to its interests. Therefore, the foundation of the EU’s Eastern policy should be to strengthen the ability of Eastern European states to detect and counter institutional weaknesses in critical sectors such as energy and cybersecurity. This includes expanding resilience to hybrid attacks, disinformation, and developing crisis management

capabilities. Enhancing these areas will be key to ensuring the stability and security of the region.

RECOMMENDATION:

The EU’s Absorption Capacity Should Also Be Defined by Its Security

A candidate country’s readiness to join the European Union is determined by the Copenhagen Criteria, which encompass political, economic, and legal aspects. Recently, due to controversies surrounding judicial reforms in Poland and Hungary, the rule of law has been subjected to particularly detailed scrutiny. However, these criteria are imposed on the applicant state. The question of whether the EU itself is prepared for enlargement is a matter of political character.

Today’s debate about the EU’s readiness for future enlargements largely revolves around institutional aspects and the challenge of decision-making in a Union with 30+ members. However, in a context where the EU is compelled – and aspires – to play a geopolitical role in the face of Russia’s confrontational stance, security becomes an equally critical criterion. Admitting new members with unstable domestic political situations, significant dependence on energy supplies from Russia, vulnerability to Russian disinformation, infiltration of administrative structures, or corrupt economic ties to Moscow, could place a substantial burden on the Union itself.

Therefore, the EU’s absorption capacity should also be understood in terms of its readiness to share responsibility for the security of a new member state, as well as Brussels’ awareness that such enlargement could increase shared risks rather than mitigate them. For this reason, a key priority must be the long-term and credible convergence of the candidate country’s foreign and security policies with those of the EU.

“The EU’s absorption capacity should also be understood in terms of its readiness to share responsibility for the security of a new member state, as well as Brussels’ awareness that such enlargement could increase shared risks rather than mitigate them.”

Poland's Ability to Influence the Enlargement Policies of Other States

Poland's policy regarding the enlargement of the European Union to Eastern Europe, as well as support for these states against Russian imperialism has been a consistent element of Warsaw's foreign policy paradigm, regardless of changes in government composition. However, Poland's ability to influence its European partners, build coalitions around its interests, and maintain a positive image within EU institutions has varied.

The erosion of trust in Poland's rule of law due to judicial reforms undertaken by the Law & Justice government dominated discussions in Brussels for a long time, leading to questions whether the 2004 enlargement that included Central European countries was a well-considered decision. Critics cited the alleged weakness of state institutions in the region and drew analogies regarding potential candidates from Eastern Europe. The war in Ukraine shifted this perspective, tying adherence to European values less to the state of the rule of law and more to a geopolitical narrative of defending values deemed European. With the change of government in 2023, Poland returned to the European mainstream, regaining its capacity to form coalitions within the EU policymaking framework. In shaping these policies to align with its interests, Poland must craft a vision of change that gathers broad support for key issues, including security, enlargement, Eastern policy, and migration.

A particularly striking example is Poland's support for Ukraine's EU membership. By advocating for Kyiv's integration of EU policies and

a credible enlargement perspective, Warsaw faces the challenge of EU institutional reform. This is evident that some policy-makers, such as Chancellor Scholz of Germany tie support for Ukraine's accession to reforms within the EU itself. Proposals for improved decision-making include increasing the use of qualified majority voting in foreign and security policy and reducing the number of EU commissioners. These topics have long been a red line for Polish governments, which fear Franco-German dominance in decision-making, and advancing federalism within the EU.

Declarations of support for Ukraine's EU path are currently politically popular, and undoubtedly influenced by sentiments evoked by Russia's 2022 invasion. Yet, many of the same states publicly endorsing Ukraine's accession strongly oppose treaty changes. In Poland, parties opposing such changes constitute approximately 93% of the parliament, led by both the main governing party and the main opposition party. Poland's position emphasises that enlargement should not be tied to institutional reforms.

Regional cooperation formats where Poland could seek support and understanding for its vision of European Eastern policy currently show varied dynamics. Due to significant political divergences between Warsaw and Budapest, the Visegrád Group has virtually ceased producing joint statements on foreign policy. The emergence of Robert Fico's populist government in Slovakia and populist trends in Czechia could deepen this issue further. A key problem is the response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, particularly in terms of sanctions and energy dependence on Russian sources.

Where meeting agendas have focused on strengthening defence capabilities, such as within the Bucharest Nine framework, conditions have been more favourable for agreements, albeit not without reservations. The Lublin Triangle (Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania) has since

“In shaping EU policies to align with its interests, Poland must craft a vision of change that gathers broad support for key issues, including security, enlargement, Eastern policy, and migration.”

2022 informally shifted to a format of meetings among the presidents of the three countries. The key focus is on support for Ukraine against the aggressor, but the format remains moderately used. Cooperation with Western partners – France and Germany – within the Weimar Triangle has seen nominal revitalisation. Meetings occur frequently across multiple levels, including parliamentary ones. This framework aligns with Poland's narrative of its growing role in European politics. At the same time, it appeals to Germany and France, which, amid government instability and mutual animosities among leaders, seek areas of cooperation by involving a key partner from the EU's Eastern Flank.

RECOMMENDATION:
**Strengthening Poland's Position
as a Creator of European Policies**

Poland's Eastern policy is entering a phase where its shape and influence on EU-wide solutions are less defined by coordination capabilities with CEE states and more by building a strong position on the European stage through closer engagement with leading EU policymakers: Germany and France. Additionally, weakened decision-making in Berlin and Paris creates opportunities for Warsaw. Poland's Presidency of the EU Council in the first half of 2025, coinciding with pivotal outcomes in the

war in Ukraine and elections in key European states, is seen as a chance to steer a broader narrative on security. At the same time, Warsaw is expected to demonstrate stability and leadership amidst the evolving landscape of European security architecture.

There is no doubt that the future of European Eastern policy, particularly in terms of relations with Russia and Eastern Partnership countries, depends on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. Presenting a clear vision of Kyiv's integration into the EU is just as critical as stabilising Ukraine after the war. Support for Ukraine is not only about fostering a success story that could inspire the European project's Eastern ambitions but it also serves as a test of the EU's geopolitical responsibility and leadership.

Poland's key role in this process stems from its geographical and historical proximity to Ukraine, as well as their shared assessment of the Russian threat. Just as reconciled Polish-German relations proved crucial for Poland's Euro-Atlantic integration, Ukraine requires strong support from Warsaw. To date, Poland's assistance – encompassing political declarations, financial aid, and military support – symbolises its investment in Ukraine's European future. By August 2024, Poland had provided Kyiv with approximately 100 billion



It is crucial not only to reclaim Poland's capacity to co-create EU policies and influence Brussels' narrative but also to reinforce the necessity of delivering a concrete security offer to Eastern Europe.

“The danger lies in the tension between a Promethean vision of Eastern policy and Poland’s ability to influence decisions of Germany and France, which view the European project as requiring institutional reformulation.”

Polish zloty, including military supplies and equipment worth around 12 billion Polish zloty. Significantly, Poland’s support extends beyond Ukraine, addressing pro-democratic changes in Belarus, whose opposition received over 75 million USD between 2018 and 2019.

A Poland actively shaping European policy is also one that can elevate Eastern Europe’s interests within EU forums. The foremost interest in the current situation is, of course, security. Thus, it is crucial not only to reclaim Poland’s capacity to co-create EU policies and influence Brussels’ narrative but also to reinforce the necessity of delivering a concrete security offer to Eastern Europe. This should include strengthening the social resilience capabilities of these states.

The danger lies in the tension between a Promethean vision of Eastern policy and Poland’s ability to influence decisions of Germany and France, which view the European project as requiring institutional reformulation. The need to engage in debates about the EU’s institutional structure in light of enlargement was highlighted by Minister Sikorski during his address to the Sejm in 2024. This pragmatic approach nuances the previously rigid declarations of Poland’s main political forces. It is grounded in the understanding that key agreements must involve France and Germany and that their political support for Eastern enlargement will determine the future of the EU’s influence in Eastern Europe.

RECOMMENDATION:

Clearly Defining Poland’s Goals Regarding the Resolution of the War in Ukraine and Incorporating them into EU’s Eastern Policy

It is a subject of domestic debate in Poland to what extent the country’s support for Ukraine’s Euroatlantic ambitions has been effectively leveraged to advance its own bilateral interests

with Kyiv. Regardless of the assessment of the Polish Foreign Ministry’s effectiveness so far, it is crucial to acknowledge the pivotal impact that the resolution of the war in Ukraine will have on Polish interests. This resolution will undoubtedly transcend bilateral relations and shape the broader issue of European security architecture, which is of vital importance to Poland. At the same time, whether Kyiv’s aspirations are realised will also depend on the stances of European powers and the United States. Similarly to past EU and NATO enlargements in Central Europe, which were driven not only by economic and normative alignment but also by geopolitical shifts, Ukraine’s future will hinge on both internal and external factors. Poland’s current efforts are aimed not only at supporting Ukraine in its fight against aggression but also at stabilising the entire Eastern neighbourhood of the EU and aligning Ukraine’s foreign and security policy with the EU during its pre-accession period.

Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine has violated the principle of inviolability of internationally recognised borders – a cornerstone of Poland’s foreign policy paradigm. Poland, a country historically scarred by the imperial and annexationist actions of its neighbours, prioritises respect for borders, the defence of independence, and the freedom of states to choose their alliances. Moscow’s actions in Eastern Europe directly undermine these principles.

The growing perception that the resolution of Russia’s military aggression may lead to territorial concessions by Ukraine to Moscow in exchange for a peace agreement is not only a blow to Ukraine’s internationally recognised borders but it also risks undermining transatlantic solidarity in responding to Russian imperialism. This is especially true if the resolution is determined by only a select group of Western allies negotiating with Putin or, worse, solely between Trump and Putin.

Donald Trump’s push for a swift resolution in Ukraine while aiming to delegate regional security responsibilities entirely to Europeans could embolden Russia to pursue broader ambitions. These could include attempts to reshape the security framework of Eastern Europe in a concert of powers style and through a division of spheres of influence. At the negotiating table Russia could also seek to raise issues such as arms reduction, NATO enlargement, or EU

“It is crucial to remember that Ukraine, more than any other Eastern Partnership country, carries both the weight of challenges for the EU’s structure but it can also prove Europe’s geopolitical agency. This makes Ukraine pivotal in the systemic rivalry with Russia.”

expansion, dependingly on Moscow’s negotiating strength and the degree of Western solidarity.

The discourse around Ukraine’s neutrality – limiting its ability to define its alliances independently – is already emerging. It is crucial to remember that Ukraine, more than any other Eastern Partnership country, carries both the weight of challenges for the EU’s structure but

it can also prove Europe’s geopolitical agency. This makes Ukraine pivotal in the systemic rivalry with Russia. The new European security architecture emerging from the war in Ukraine will significantly reshape relations between European states and Russia. This issue extends beyond European politics alone, touching on the permanent and effective abandonment of the paradigm of economic cooperation with Moscow and preventing a return to pre-2022 relations.

Given these circumstances, Poland’s diplomacy should aim to achieve the following objectives:

- **Upholding the principle of inviolability of internationally recognised borders** – even if there is a *de facto* acceptance of Russia’s territorial control in Ukraine after the cessation of hostilities, this should not translate into legally effective territorial cession by Kyiv to Moscow;
- **Ensuring transatlantic solidarity in agreements with Russia** – avoiding divisions between Donald Trump’s administration and the EU in dealing with Putin;
- **Preventing linking the resolution of war in Ukraine with the shape of CEE regional security** – particularly avoiding scenarios where NATO’s Eastern Flank capabilities are reduced through arms limitations or troop withdrawals;
- **Developing a long-term Western policy toward Russia that extends beyond the conflict in Ukraine** – ensuring there is no return to the political and economic cooperation seen before 2022.

The Need to Shape a Long-Term Policy Toward Russia

The period preceding Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was marked by growing tensions between the EU and Russia. From the Russian perspective, the EU's Eastern policy, pursued through the Eastern Partnership, was created to undermine Russia's economic and systemic influence in Eastern Europe. What Brussels perceived as a normative offer, Moscow always regarded as inherently geopolitical. At the same time, the policy of economic cooperation maintained by European states – despite clear manifestations of Russian imperialism in Eastern Europe – provided Moscow with an opportunity to extend its influence even among EU member states. The current open rivalry is systemic in nature and will persist as long as Russia views the EU as a threat to its sphere of influence.

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The geopolitical significance of the EU's Eastern policy became evident with the war in Ukraine. Since then, the EU – albeit facing challenges stemming from the internal dynamics of its member states – has actively participated in curbing Russia's military capabilities, including through economic sanctions targeting its economy. The principles guiding Brussels' approach to Moscow can be summarised as follows: political isolation of Russia; holding Russia and its leaders accountable for violations of international law and war crimes; support for the EU's neighbouring states opposing Russia, including through enlargement policy; cooperation with NATO and partners to defend the international rules-based order; enhancing internal resilience in the areas of social stability, energy, and critical infrastructure; support for civil society in Russia and beyond.

RECOMMENDATION:**Sustaining and Expanding Measures Targeting Russia**

The belief that ending the war in Ukraine will lead to a lasting resolution of the rivalry with Putin's Russia and will create terms for peaceful coexistence results from a lack of understanding of the systemic nature of the confrontation between the European offer and the Russian World. The longevity of this confrontation, even after the active phase of the war ends, arises from its systemic nature and the threat that the current international order poses to Putin's geopolitical ambitions. For this reason, continuing measures against Russia beyond the potential end of the war in Ukraine is essential to dismantle Russia's capacity for further destabilising Eastern Europe and the internal situation within the EU itself.

The sanctions mechanism, which by April 2024 had encompassed 13 packages, aims to cripple the Russian economy, limit its access to technology and markets, and deprive it of resources for military operations. EU sanctions have reduced EU-Russia trade by over 50%, though they have not yet completely freed European states from dependence on Russian energy sources. Nor have they prevented Russia from intensifying trade with third countries, including strengthening military cooperation with Iran and North Korea. Nevertheless, the visible impact of the sanctions has been the increasing isolation of Russia and its exclusion from effectively influencing the European market – a tool previously closely tied to Moscow's geopolitical interests.

The sanctions regime has also gained political significance by enabling a more unified and long-term policy toward Russia, as it eliminates Russian instruments of influence. Poland's Presidency in the EU Council recognises the need not only to strengthen sanctions but also to combat their circumvention. Further progress in this area depends however on the willingness of countries like Hungary to reduce economic ties with Russia – a stance complicated by the

“Poland’s role should focus on consolidating the EU’s position and ensuring the continuation of existing mechanisms isolating Russia, particularly after the active phase of military operations in Ukraine concludes.”

approach of Viktor Orbán’s government. Similarly, maintaining collective isolation of Putin and his regime faces challenges. Despite the authoritarian nature of elections in Russia, the suppression of opposition (including the death of Alexei Navalny), some European politicians still find political justification for engaging with Vladimir Putin. These actions are often framed as peace-seeking – by figures such as Chancellor Scholz, willing to bolster his domestic position, or by Prime Minister Orbán, who aims to project an image of his influence on the international stage.

The solidarity regarding compensating EU member states for the costs of supporting Ukraine also remains in question. As with sanctions, Hungary has used its ability to block EU decisions to hinder the functioning of the European Peace Facility, directly disadvantaging Poland, which awaits its payments. Some partial success, despite the complex legal nature and prolonged debates, has been achieved in steps taken

to utilise frozen Russian assets for Ukraine’s support. The increasing costs of the war, and the future demands of rearming Ukraine and rebuilding its economy, justify efforts to hold Russia financially accountable for its aggression. Currently, actions focus on using windfall profits from frozen Russian funds, with the EU working closely with the G7 on this issue.

The often unanimous decision-making requirement complicates the continuation of mechanisms targeting Russia, posing challenges for states that recognise the connection between rebuilding Russia’s economic and military potential and the threat it poses – not only to Eastern Europe but also to EU member states. Poland’s role should focus on consolidating the EU’s position and ensuring the continuation of existing mechanisms isolating Russia, particularly after the active phase of military operations in Ukraine concludes. Russian aggression toward EU and NATO states will not cease with the end of the war, making this effort crucial for the future stability of the region.

**RECOMMENDATION:
Formulating a New European Security
Architecture Targeted at Russia**

Russia’s ambitions to counter Western influence in Eastern Europe are a matter of existential interest for Moscow. The Kremlin links its success in the geopolitical confrontation with the



From the West’s perspective, merely ending the war in Ukraine is insufficient to conclude that the threat has been mitigated. It is necessary to actively and effectively deter Russia from pursuing aggressive policies.

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EU and NATO to the survival of its regime and the vision of the Russian World. Even if Russian expansionist ambitions were curtailed, the mere existence of a competing offer for the societies of Eastern Europe (and potentially for Russia itself) provides sufficient grounds for maintaining the confrontation from the Kremlin’s point of view. Russia aspires to play the role of a global power on the international stage, and acquiring parts of Ukraine’s territory is not an end in itself.

From the West’s perspective, merely ending the war in Ukraine is insufficient to conclude that

the threat has been mitigated. It is necessary to actively and effectively deter Russia from pursuing aggressive policies, both against EU and NATO member states and within its immediate geopolitical neighbourhood. At the same time, every effort must be made to permanently eliminate tendencies that undermine internal solidarity in responding to Russia’s aggression. This includes both strategies aimed at blocking a unified response and those seeking to use the potential end of open conflict in Ukraine as an opportunity to quickly return to economic cooperation with Russia.

This requires a comprehensive overhaul of the security architecture, which must recognise Russia not as a partner but as the primary and long-term threat. What is needed is the development of a new paradigm of economic growth for many European countries – one that discards notions such as “cheap security” or “cheap energy resources.” Instead, it must embrace the reality of high defence spending and the need to boost economic competitiveness.

2

European Union's Eastern Policy in 2025 – Perspectives from Outside Poland

CZECHIA

Pavel Havlíček – Research Fellow, Association for International Affairs (AMO.CZ)



Pavel Havlíček's research focus is on Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine and Russia, and the Eastern Partnership. He also deals with questions of security, disinformation and strategic communication as well as democratisation and civil society support in the CEE and post-Soviet space. Pavel Havlíček was externally cooperating and advising the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic on implementation of the digital agenda and digital regulation of social media platforms. Member of TOP 09, centre-right Czech political party.

At the end of 2024, the EU finds itself not only in the Trump World 2.0, but also to a state of global instability typical for regional conflicts and societal upheavals, including in its immediate neighbourhood, and many more happening around the world.

Ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, *de facto* occupation of Belarus, Kremlin's meddling in the Moldovan presidential elections and referendum on the future accession to the EU as well as numerous conflicts in the South Caucasus – all happening in the direct neighbourhood of the EU.

The recently approved European Commission headed by Ursula von der Leyen with a strong team on the foreign and security policy affairs might at least give some hope for a stronger reaction and leadership in the next five years.

And while the EU has been observing the nominations of Donald Trump's presidency team with quite some concern, it does not want to remain only a passive observer but rather play an active role in managing the global instability as much in their favour as possible.

Where is the leadership?

Even if it might look like that after the recent collapse of the German government and the domestic political instability in France, the EU is much weakened and not in a great shape to act in the world, other emerging powers that are keen to complement or even replace the previous German dominance and weakening French positions.

Among them, Poland and Italy are certainly to be watched as representatives of the previously second-tier European powers, which are now coming to the front and counterbalancing the original Franco-German motor of EU cooperation.

Both actors are keen on working with the upcoming US presidential administration, and possibly also minimising the negative influence of the Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán who has tense relations with both of his counterparts Donald Tusk and Georgia Meloni.

Where this confrontation will be particularly visible is in Eastern Europe for which Hungary and Slovakia already asked a review, most specifically for Ukraine, which is at the centre of the West's attention due to the ongoing Russian aggression and mounting pressure by the Kremlin in the past several months.

Which tools and instruments do we have available?

And while it is still to be seen which direction both ends of the Transatlantic community will take, and how much they will do that together, there are several big strategic decisions to take in front of the EU, no matter the US approach.

First, it is how much to pursue an autonomous course from the US, which in the EU's terms towards Eastern Europe or Western Balkans means also the enlargement policy, which has finally speeded up after a decade of no progress. How much to make the technocratic policy of the EU fit for the war times, for which it was never actually designed when rather focusing on the internal reforms and democratisation of individual countries, remains a pending question.

Second, what to do with the Eastern Partnership, the regional policy of the EU towards the East, which after more than 15 years somehow disappeared from the EU's agenda. This was clearly visible at the European Parliament hearings, despite delivering some very concrete benefits to the six regional partners, most notably around the people-to-people ties, trade or energy and connectivity. Hopefully, the next mandate of the European Commission will offer more food for thought.

And finally, how to shape the future relations with Russia, which has been trying to spread chaos, divide the EU and undermine the cohesion of the European foreign and security policy, most notably by investing in the far-right and far-left political groupings across the continent. With the EU's approach towards Russia gradually diverging, it is important to capture and solidify the existing deterrence and defence posture, while also investing in pro-democracy forces, independent Russian and Russian-speaking media and civil society that represents an alternative to the Kremlin.

The challenge cannot be more pressuring when considering the number of question marks over the future of the EU's eastern policy, and foreign and security position(s) more broadly. At the same time, the closest partners of the EU in Ukraine, Moldova and most recently also Armenia are seeking closer relations and more support and solidarity when being confronted with Russian aggression, foreign meddling or domestic instability, as best visible in the case of Georgia.

Thus, many eyes are looking at the upcoming Polish EU Presidency that will oversee the EU's agenda and guide the Union throughout the first days of Trump's term. Concurrently, Poland might be also showing the way towards a more secure, stable and predictable European continent, especially if it persuades Trump that it is worth investing in NATO and the EU rather than confronting it with a trade war and diplomatic divergence that would only benefit Russia, China or other pariah states around the globe.

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Daniel Lemmen is a historian and political analyst specializing in German-Polish (geopolitical) relations. He has been working for the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in its Warsaw Office for several years, focusing on policy analysis and advisory. Previously, he was academically active at the Collegium Polonicum and the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder). He studied Polish philology as well as the history and culture of Central and Eastern Europe in Bamberg, Poznań, and Frankfurt (Oder). In 2021, he completed his doctoral thesis: “Germany, Poland, and Geopolitics: On the Role of Both States in the Geopolitical System” which will be published in early 2025.

At the beginning of 2025, the EU’s Eastern policy confronts considerable challenges. Russia continues to pose the most significant threat to European security, deliberately destabilising its Eastern neighbourhood through military aggression in Ukraine, economic coercion, and hybrid warfare.

Ukraine is at the epicentre of this conflict. In the third year of the war, the country’s remarkable resilience is being put to the test by increasing military exhaustion and a tense economic situation. The relentless fighting and destruction of critical infrastructure not only hinder reconstruction but also jeopardise support for essential reforms, leaving Ukraine’s future dependent on sustained external assistance.

Moldova and Georgia face ongoing vulnerabilities to Russian influence. Both nations are struggling with economic fragility and societal divisions, weakening their pro-European orientation. These internal challenges provide fertile ground for Moscow to exploit and intensify political destabilisation. Belarus, in contrast, remains firmly entrenched within Russia’s sphere

of control. Here, the EU’s options are limited to long-term support for the Belarusian opposition as a means of preserving the prospect of democratic alternatives.

Within the EU itself, internal divisions further complicate a unified approach to Eastern policy. While Central and Eastern European states advocate for deeper integration of the EU’s eastern partners, scepticism persists in parts of Western Europe. Concerns over institutional capacity, financial commitments, and reform readiness prevent a strong consensus. This lack of unity weakens the EU’s credibility and hinders its ability to respond swiftly to escalating geopolitical challenges.

As Europe’s leading economic and political power, Germany has a special responsibility to shape the EU’s Eastern strategy. However, its capacity to act will depend on how quickly a new government is formed after the February 2025 federal elections. A prolonged delay until May or June could coincide with the conclusion of Poland’s EU Council Presidency.

Poland, on the other hand, has established itself as a key driver of European Eastern policy. In recent years, Warsaw has earned regional trust as Ukraine’s strongest advocate, providing significant military and diplomatic support. A newly formed German government, most likely under the leadership of Christian Democrat Friedrich Merz, will likely prioritise closer cooperation with Poland, building on already well-established ties.

A coordinated German-Polish approach will be pivotal in stabilising Eastern Europe and creating long-term perspectives for the EU’s Eastern neighbours. Poland offers regional leadership, security expertise, and strategic clarity, while Germany brings economic strength, financial resources, and diplomatic influence. Together, they form an ideal partnership to strengthen the EU’s response to Russian aggression.

Support for Ukraine must be the cornerstone of this joint strategy. Beyond immediate humanitarian and economic assistance, the already established early reconstruction fund must be further strengthened to address Ukraine's long-term needs. Equally crucial is Germany's enhanced military support. Delivering long-range weapons systems such as the Taurus cruise missile would provide Ukraine with a decisive strategic advantage, weakening Russia's operational capabilities and demonstrating the reliability of Germany and Poland as leading partners in the region.

Should a ceasefire materialise, Germany and Poland must step up to secure Ukraine's territorial integrity and long-term stability. With

France likely constrained by domestic political challenges, the Weimar Triangle will – if at all – depend heavily on decisive leadership from Berlin and Warsaw.

To meet these challenges, Germany must act promptly and decisively. Together with Poland and the other so-called Big Five members of the EU, Berlin could develop concrete measures to stabilise Eastern Europe, accelerate the integration of Eastern partner states into European frameworks, and strengthen Europe's energy sovereignty. Only through a coordinated strategy combining economic recovery, military assistance, and political integration can the EU effectively reduce Russia's geopolitical leverage and secure long-term stability in the region.

GEORGIA

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Nikoloz Khatishvili has 18+ years of experience across public and private sectors, including diplomacy. He teaches at Tbilisi State University and BTU, has published 23 research papers, and speaks at global forums. Nikoloz contributes to projects by IRI, NED, GMF, NDI, and the US State Department, focusing on democracy, disinformation, Black Sea security, and Georgia's EU/NATO integration. As co-founder of the Institute of Western Democracy and Leadership, he promotes liberal values and leadership. He is a McCain Institute Fellow, member of IRI GenDem, Warsaw Security Forum Democracy Network, GMF PDN Fellow, and Board Member of Georgia's US Exchange Alumni Association (EPAG).

As we look ahead to 2025, it seems to be another challenging year for the EU Eastern policy, much like 2024. The current geopolitical climate offers little hope for transformative positive changes in the short term period. At the heart of these challenges lies Russia's increasingly aggressive policies, particularly in its immediate neighborhood.

The foreign policy priorities of the new US administration and the unity within the EU will play critical roles in shaping the coming year's contours. A persistent obstacle for the EU Eastern policy will remain its lack of internal unity. Over the past three years, there have been numerous instances where one or several member states have blocked or delayed joint decisions. Notable examples include delays in providing military aid to Ukraine and imposing sanctions on Russia. Furthermore, skepticism around the EU enlargement continues to hinder progress. Despite the urgent need to strengthen ties with aspiring member states like Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, enlargement fatigue persists, fueled by the reluctance of certain member states. The EU's refusal to grant Georgia candidate status in 2022 is a clear example of this hesitation.

While the war in Ukraine has catalyzed greater consensus on many issues, significant disagreements remain on topics such as energy security, defense spending, military industry investments, and arms supplies to Ukraine. Resolving these divisions will be crucial for the EU to maintain its credibility and effectiveness on the global stage. Equally concerning are Russia's disinformation campaigns and influence operations targeting both the EU member states and EaP countries. These efforts aim to weaken democratic institutions and sow skepticism about European unity. The Kremlin's activities were particularly evident during elections in Romania and Moldova, where attempts to interfere were not as effective as was expected by Moscow. Moreover, Russian propaganda continues to bolster pro-Russian populist and far-right parties across Europe, threatening stability and unity within the EU. These destabilizing tactics highlight the urgent need for robust measures to counter disinformation and strengthen democratic resilience.

A notable weakness in the EU's Eastern Policy is the lack of a long-term strategic vision for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Without a comprehensive and inclusive integration strategy, these countries face an uncertain path, which discourages bold political decisions and undermines their commitment to the European project.

For Georgia, 2025 is expected to bring a host of significant challenges. The ongoing Russian occupation of Georgian territories and hybrid warfare tactics exacerbate the threats facing the country. Georgia's future is closely tied to Ukraine's victory in its war with Russia, as regional dynamics remain interconnected. Despite Georgia's past role as a reform leader within the EaP and its achievement of the EU candidate status in 2023, recent legislative changes and some decisions have played a negative role on its integration process. Actions such as the adoption of a controversial Law on Transparency of foreign influence and the

government's decision to delay the EU accession negotiations until 2028 have weakened political support from the EU member states and eroded trust in Georgia's government. These setbacks have also triggered public protests, reflecting the discontent within Georgian society. To overcome these challenges, Georgia must prioritize restoring trust with the EU and advancing its integration process. Key actions include repealing the Law on Transparency of foreign influence, implementing the EU's nine recommendations, and resuming active negotiations with the EU.

Accelerating the implementation of the Association Agreement, harmonization of the Georgian legislation with the EU standards, and utilizing initiatives like the Roadmap2EU will be essential steps. Georgia's geographical location also poses challenges, as it lacks a direct land border with the EU member states, complicating economic and transport integration. To address this, both Georgia and the EU must invest in connectivity projects, particularly in the energy and transport sectors, to strengthen physical and economic ties. Additionally, Georgia must develop a comprehensive action plan to counter Russian disinformation and propaganda, which remain significant obstacles to its EU aspirations.

The year ahead holds immense significance for both Europe and the Eastern Partnership countries. Much will depend on the foreign policy direction of the new US administration and Europe's ability to present a united front. At the same time, Russia's actions remain the greatest challenge to stability in the region. Ultimately, the US stance on Russia and Eastern Europe will play a decisive role in shaping the geopolitical landscape. However, given the uncertainties surrounding US foreign policy priorities, the path forward remains unclear. In this context, Georgia and its Eastern European neighbors must continue to demonstrate their commitment to democratic values and European integration while navigating the challenges ahead.

Andras Braun – Foreign policy expert & Analyst



András Braun has a vast experience working with the US think tank community and supporting the transatlantic security relations, with a key focus on CEE-US links. Previously he was working for a Hungarian think tank's representation office in Brussels, and also got experience in the EU's enlargement policy while he was a Blue Book Trainee at the European Commission. He earned his Ph.D. degree in political sciences in 2020 from the Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest, Hungary. He also had the opportunity to study the democratic transition of the Western Balkans while he was in Sarajevo and Belgrade between 2016 and 2017.

Recent security challenges in Europe, as well as in its immediate neighborhood, have affected the security environment of the continent. These events have encouraged European decision-makers to rethink substantial elements of the EU's neighborhood and enlargement policy in order to accelerate the accession process for its old (Western Balkans) and new candidates (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova). As stated by the European Commission, the European Council's green light to give candidate status for Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine is *"further testimony to the geopolitical weight of EU enlargement."* However, despite such new momentum, enlargement also faces multiple obstacles. While it is difficult to question the geopolitical element and its importance, some member states, even in Central Europe hold differing views on the candidacy of the Eastern Partnership countries.

Before the invasion of Ukraine, the Central European states largely supported enlargement in the Western Balkans, as the (former) Visegrád Group expressed this support on numerous occasions. One of the main arguments for their strong support, in addition to political and

economic reasons, was based on security, with claims that EU membership could contribute to the EU's stabilization efforts in a post-conflict region. However, February 2022 seemed to be a game-changer in this aspect as well. Specifically, the question of Ukraine's future membership divided two long-term allies, Poland and Hungary. Both countries remain committed to the Western Balkans, but their policies regarding Ukraine are far from identical. In terms of Eastern enlargement policies, Poland seems to be primarily focused on Ukraine, while Hungary's government has opposed the idea of a "swift" enlargement process for Kyiv, reminding that the Western Balkan countries have been in the waiting room for almost two decades. Despite this reluctance, the EU was able to start accession talks with two of its new candidates, Ukraine and Moldova. Beyond the perspective of Ukraine, the two remaining candidates also deserve attention. The recent elections in Moldova experienced significant interference from foreign malign actors attempting to divert the country's Western path. This phenomenon can be also detected in EU member states (see, for example, the case of the Romanian presidential elections). As for Georgia, Tbilisi does not appear to be following the examples of Ukraine and Moldova. According to the European Commission, domestic developments in the country indicate that *"the course of action taken by the Georgian government since spring 2024 jeopardizes Georgia's EU path, effectively halting the accession process."*

The lack of a clear EU perspective poses a significant obstacle to the EU's enlargement strategy and to Eastern European candidates. This presents a risk, especially during times of war and ongoing foreign malign influence operations in the EU and its candidate countries. Both Central Europe and future EU members in Southeast and Eastern Europe face similar challenges. A more unified Central European approach is essential to address these issues.

To find a solution and common ground, this commentary offers the following recommendations:

- Closer regional cooperation among Central and Eastern European member states is essential, as it can revitalize the Visegrád Group. This collaboration should focus on shared interests and strategies for stabilizing the Western Balkans and Eastern candidate countries, providing them with a clear European perspective.
- Collective fight against foreign interference. This topic is very much linked to the priorities of the Polish EU Presidency. Moldova, Georgia, and the Western Balkans are facing similar challenges regarding foreign interference and external influence.
- Promote multilateral cooperation through existing frameworks and channels, such as the European Political Community (EPC), to maintain dialogue and collaboration among European states.
- Invest in people-to-people relations. The support of regular exchanges among experts, civil society, and policymakers from candidate countries and Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states is essential to build and maintain trust.

UKRAINE

Iryna Krasnoshtan – Programme Director, International Centre for Ukrainian Victory



Iryna Krasnoshtan has extensive experience in security & defence matters, NATO-Ukraine and transatlantic relations. She previously worked for the NATO Representation to Ukraine, including as a Political Analyst. Iryna holds an MA in European Interdisciplinary Studies from the College of Europe. Her other professional experience includes working with the Embassy of France in Ukraine, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission to Ukraine, and an internship in the House of Commons in Ottawa, Canada. Iryna is also an Alumna of the George C. Marshall Center and has engaged with GCMC as an adjunct professor and co-seminar leader for the Seminar on Regional Security. She was also a James S. Denton Transatlantic Fellowship holder with the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) in 2022.

In 2025 Russian aggressive posture *vis-a-vis* the West, including Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, combined with its efforts to undermine EU's unity and the transatlantic link in NATO, as well as on-going hybrid warfare tactics deployed against EU member states, will remain key obstacles for the EU Eastern Policy. While the EU so far managed to stay united in response to the full-scale aggression of Ukraine, including in approving sanctions against Russia and providing economic, military, humanitarian and other support to Ukraine, the internal differences have been showing amongst member states, and there are risks that in 2025 the internal divide may be growing. The position of Hungary is the most prominent in this regard, which supports lifting the sanctions and engaging with Russia. At the same time, a number of states, including Poland and Nordic-Baltic states have a more determined position. There are also different positions within the EU member states on the future of the enlargement, including the

need for internal reforms, the absorption capacity, as well as potential sequence of accession (considering the Western Balkans and their long road to membership). The problem also remains in energy dependencies on Russia, despite a number of steps adopted to diversify its energy sources. In particular, the EU's imports of Russian LNG have grown in the past years.

Considering the change in the US White House on 20 January, and the promise of the president-elect to finish the war in 24 hours, the divergence in the stance on Russia is only growing. Part of the countries want a quick solution and return to business as usual, while others only want a sustainable solution, with strong security guarantees which will ensure that Ukraine will not be attacked by Russia again, and that long and just peace can be achieved. While the EU has a mutual security clause, it cannot provide for the same security guarantees as Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, so NATO membership remains the priority for Ukraine, in addition – and not instead – of the EU one.

Since the occupation of Crimea in 2014 and aggression against Ukraine (if not before – from 2008 occupation of Georgia), there should be a clear understanding of the nature of Russian imperialism, and there should be no mistake in viewing current full-scale aggression against Ukraine as a temporary discomfort for Europe. Regardless of the potential negotiations with Russia, the EU should be ready for the continuous Russian aggressive posture.

Recommendations for Ukraine's foreign policy in this context:

- further strengthen the partnership with the EU, and advocate for gradual integration in the internal processes as a candidate country;
- as part of its EU accession process, accelerate reforms in key areas, such as judiciary reform, anti-corruption efforts, and economic governance;
- advocate for a clear and realistic timeline for its EU accession, with well-defined benchmarks and milestones;
- continue to engage the most supportive countries in the format of the “coalitions of the willing” on the specific issues, where the unanimity will not be found within the EU;
- encourage further EU's energy diversification and full embargo or at least war tax on the Russian LNG, as well as strengthen the energy security cooperation with both EU and NATO;
- pursue full confiscation of the Russian frozen assets, the majority of which are in the jurisdiction of the EU states;
- deepen defence cooperation with EU member states, including further attraction of European defence investments into Ukrainian defence industry;
- work together with both EU and NATO on a more robust defence and deterrence posture in Eastern Europe, as well as on security guarantees needed before Ukraine's accession to NATO and Art. 5 coming into force;
- continue sharing Ukraine's lessons learnt and positioning of Ukraine as a contributor to the European and Euro-Atlantic security, as well as a key player in ensuring stability in the Black Sea region.

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