The Eastern Partnership: between resilience and interference

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The fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the USSR were supposed to usher in a golden age in which liberal democracy and a market economy would naturally spread throughout the European continent. On the strength of this optimism, the European Union concluded accession negotiations with ten countries between 2003 and 2005, opened them to Croatia and Turkey, promised the same to the Western Balkans and launched the Neighbourhood Policy in the East and the South. Initiated in 2004, this policy intended to ensure 'stability and prosperity' on the European Union's new borders after the accession of the Central and Eastern European countries.

The results have not lived up to expectations. The Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched at the Prague summit on 7 May 2009, under the impetus of Poland and Sweden, with ambitious agreements. It immediately came up against interference by Russia, which was met with a policy of resilience promoted by the EU. In this delicate geopolitical context, what is the future of the EaP?

AMBITIOUS ASSOCIATION AND FREE-TRADE AGREEMENTS

This EaP includes the six countries of the initial neighbourhood policy: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The EU proposed political association in an Association Agreement (AA), coupled with economic integration through a so-called 'Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement' (DCFTA). Only Georgia and Moldova signed it in 2013. We recall that Ukrainian President Yanukovych refused to sign the agreement under pressure from Moscow, which triggered the dramatic events of Maidan Square in Kiev. He fled to Russia on 21 February 2014 and was deposed the

next day. Elected president on 25 May, Petro Poroshenko signed the agreement on 27 June in Brussels. In the meantime, the Donbass rose up and Crimea has become part of Russia. The agreements with this "Trio" (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) were implemented in 2016 after ratification.

After negotiating a similar agreement, Armenia ultimately rejected it because it feared retaliation from Russia, preferring to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) established by Russia. Moscow's military support in its conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh was essential. Yerevan finally signed a "Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement" with the EU in 2018, in a clever balancing act between Moscow and Brussels. But the EU and the EEU are customs unions, with their own tariffs, so free trade cannot take place between their respective members. This agreement therefore does not include this. A similar agreement has been under negotiation with Azerbaijan since 2017 to replace the 1999 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.

Belarus has never ratified the 1995 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. The control of elections and freedoms by the regime of Alexander Lukashenko effectively deprived the country of the Partnership tools, until February 2016 when the EU Council decided on critical engagement after the release of some political prisoners. Political dialogue and financial assistance were initiated. The relationship was short-lived as the Council declared the 9 August 2020 "election" "not free and fair". The massive, brutal repression of the demonstrations against this rigged election and the management of the COVID-19 pandemic have led the Union to impose sanctions against those directly responsible. Since then, it has been providing support to civilian victims and movements.

2

From a trade perspective, the outcome of the FTAA with the Trio has been remarkable. EU-Ukraine trade increased by 48% between 2016 and 2019 (€43.3 billion) and by 50% with Moldova. The EU has become the largest trading partner of Ukraine (40%), Moldova (54%) and Georgia (23%). At the same time, Russia's exports to Ukraine have fallen from 24% to 9%. Russia has even been relegated to third place as a trading partner of Ukraine and Georgia, after the European Union and China! This upheaval is contributing to Moscow's resentment towards the EU.

The success of student exchanges with the six EaP countries has been impressive: more than 30,000 young people have taken part in the Erasmus+ programme since 2014 and thousands of researchers are benefiting from the Union's programmes. The EU is also providing remarkable support to civil society platforms, one of the EaP's top priorities. The liberalisation of short-stay visas for Moldovans (2014), Georgians and Ukrainians (2017) has of course boosted exchanges, as have the visa facilitation and readmission agreements for Armenians, Azeris (2014) and Belarusians (2020).

The agreements with the EU have triggered a tremendous change in Ukraine: increased competitiveness, agricultural development, decentralisation of power. However, the transition remains difficult following the heavy legacy of the Soviet economy and two decades of uncertain reforms. It is estimated that three to five million Ukrainians have left the country, of whom about two million work in Poland. The UN estimates that Moldova has lost about 45% of its population since 1989, including the Russian-controlled Transnistria. Its population could fall to 2 million by 2035 from 4.3 million in 1995. Until the 2000s, Georgia experienced very high emigration, which was compounded by the spectacular decline in the birth rate experienced by all the former USSR republics. Russia itself, according to the World Bank, could lose 17 million inhabitants by 2025. Only Azerbaijan has experienced population growth. The Belarusian population has remained stable.

The Trio is facing a triple shock: transformation of economic structures, with often obsolete State-owned enterprises, globalisation and opening up to the Union, to a backdrop of weak governance and powerful oligarchs. These rapid changes have widened the social divide and left some people behind. Emigration from the EaP countries - as well as from the Western Balkans - represents an upheaval for the European continent. It enriches Member States with an often well-trained workforce, but impoverishes the countries of origin. It also reduces the pressure for reform in these countries, amidst the spread of conflicts where Russia is extending its influence.

SILOVIKI, SPETSNAZ[1] AND CYBERATTACKS: RUSSIA EXTENDING ITS INFLUENCE

It has been demonstrated in these texts[2] that Russia perceived NATO's expansion, amongst others, as a hostile act, whilst the Warsaw Pact was dissolved and the Paris Charter proclaimed in 1990 that "the division of Europe had ended" (article 1). Russia experienced the 1990's and 2000's "*with the feeling of its defeat … the West was euphorious and bathing in narcissism*"[3]. The "coloured revolutions" strengthened this feeling. And the economic chaos created by the shock therapy administered by Western advisors – the origins of powerful oligarchies – helped Vladimir Putin seize power with force, as he re-established order.

"*We have decided that these countries (Georgia, Ukraine) will become members of NATO*": with this declaration (point 23) in Bucharest on 3 April 2008, the Atlantic Alliance bolstered Moscow's fears. We remember what happened next: taking advantage of a provocation by Georgian troops in August 2008, the Russian army invaded South Ossetia and recognised its independence, as well as that of Abkhazia. These conflicts, which have been frozen since then, have prevented Georgia from joining NATO, since the "resolution of conflicts with neighbours" is a condition for membership. Wasn't this Moscow's objective, as Dmitri Medvedev was willing to declare as he spoke to his troops in 2011[4]? How can we not believe that this was also one of the objectives of the intervention in the Donbass in 2014? Moldova is still shared with the Republic of Dniester, an autonomous Russian-speaking region of Transnistria, which is not recognised and is a *de facto* Russian enclave.

[1] The "men in uniform" and special forces

[2] Maxime Lefebvre : "Russia and the West, ten disputes and inevitable escalation", European Issue n°379, January 2016. Pierre Mirel : "European Union-Russia: after three lost decades, are we moving towards new cohabitation?", European Issue n°483, September 2018.

[3] Fiodor Loukianov: « La Russie a une peur panique de la faiblesse », Le Monde, 1 August 2017.

[4] "If you soldiers had faltered back in 2008, a number of countries which NATO tried to deliberately drag into the alliance, would have most likely already been part of it", Agence Reuters 21 November 2011.

As for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, its origins lie in the allocation of this territory to Azerbaijan by Moscow in 1923, whilst 94% of its population was Armenian. Its declaration of independence in 1992 triggered a war in which the Baku army collapsed in 1994. Solutions proposed by the OSCE-led Minsk Group (co-chaired by Russia, the United States and France) have never been successful. Azerbaijan reclaimed the territory lost in 1994 in October 2020. The imposition of a ceasefire on 10 November 2020 restored Russia's central role in the region to that of the USSR, with its 1960 peacekeeping troops.

Russia has thus recreated a glacis on the borders with its neighbours, to protect its "near abroad", by deploying its *Siloviki* and other *Spetsnaz* in symbiosis with Russian-speaking communities. These communities are demanding Moscow's support for their languages and rights in these new republics, which are reluctant to recognise them in their own nationalist drive for renewed independence. Vladimir Putin's Russia has opportunistically used this revival of nationalities backed by a great deal of propaganda.

This policy, combined with disinformation, the use of oligarch networks and cyber-attacks, completes Russia's return to influence, as Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov theorised in 2013. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was a key piece in the realisation of this plan. As a final act, Moscow strengthened its influence over Belarus after Alexander Lukashenko's call for help in the face of the post-August 2020 "Blue Revolution". The country had nevertheless maintained its autonomy prior to this by rejecting the annexation of Crimea, by not recognising South Ossetia and Abkhazia and, above all, rejecting a form of integration with Russia. For the time being, Moscow's full support, the supply of cheap gas and a €1.5 billion loan tipped the regime into the Russian camp at the Putin-Lukashenko meeting in Sochi in February 2021.

This is a far cry from the stability that the Neighbourhood Policy intended to provide. It undoubtedly created a misunderstanding through the use of enlargement tools and raised expectations that the European Union was not able to meet. The agreements with the Trio may have contributed to this, as they were perceived in Moscow as hostile acts in areas of shared influence. One recalls Commission President José Manuel Barroso asking Ukraine in November 2013 to choose between Russia and the EU. While all peoples must certainly have the free choice of its destiny, history and geopolitics might have guided it along a less hazardous path.

What can the European Union do now in the face of these conflicts which have fractured societies, hindered their development and profoundly increased insecurity? Nothing, one is tempted to answer, in the face of the double weight of history: in Russia, which has become hostile to the West and neo-imperial in its external actions; in the divided Union, in which Member States are still haunted by the USSR veiled in Russian power. Faced with an elusive common foreign policy the Union is restricted to the promotion of values and human rights, whilst the Member States defend their own interests, as explained by Marc Franco. This is something Moscow has long understood and aggressively illustrated during the visit of the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (CFSP), Josep Borrell, on 4-6 February 2021. Like the OSCE, the European Union is a powerless witness to these conflicts, which are not always frozen, as shown by the Donbass and Nagorno-Karabakh. It was absent during the ceasefire negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In its declarations after the EaP summits, the Union only supports "*the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of the partners*" as well as "*efforts and mediation to end the conflicts*", but without outlining an approach. Can it be otherwise for a Union without a real common foreign policy?

IS POOR GOVERNANCE SOLUBLE IN THE ACQUIS?

Democracy, rule of law, good governance and human rights are central to the Eastern Partnership as conditions for the successful transition of the countries and for integration into the Union. While the *acquis communautaire* has brought economic progress, it has not yet ensured the advent of good governance. The levels of corruption in Moldova and Ukraine remain very high and the judiciary is far from independent. Conversely, judges use their formal "independence" to block reforms or even to declare a legitimately elected government unconstitutional, as in Moldova in June 2019.

The Eastern Partnership: between resilience and interference

4

Recent developments in Ukraine are indicative of this situation. The programme of the Poroshenko government in Ukraine in 2014 comprised four words: deregulation, decentralisation, de-bureaucratisation, de-oligarchisation. The success of the first two policies was not offset in the other two, so that corruption and clientelism have continued to flourish, causing citizen fatigue. Then they were sorely tempted to turn to populism during the 2019 election campaign. Poroshenko did just that, with the slogan '*the army, the language and the faith*'. But it was another facet of populism that brought Volodymyr Zelinsky, host of a TV series '*Servant of the People*', to power, in which the fight against corruption was a priority. Yet a year later he dismissed his reformist government. A few months later, the Constitutional Court dismantled the anti-corruption arsenal deeming it unconstitutional.

This is the incestuous marriage of the oligarchy, of information - largely in the hands of oligarchs - with politics, which too often blocks or abolishes essential reforms. "Hybrid"[5] regimes then follow, caught between proven post-Soviet methods, often with links to Moscow, and reformers who fight with the tools of European agreements and their conditionality.

Some argue that it is the absence of a promise of membership in the Union that restricts its conditionality. The Western Balkans, to which this promise was made twenty years ago, provides evidence to the contrary. To think that the *acquis communautaire* carried by conditionality can transform a country when preconditions are absent "*is functionalist hubris and political myopia*"[6]. It is only a tool for a democratic transformation that is necessarily endogenous and requires broad consensus and political determination. The free choice of countries and their ownership of the reforms are now central to the EaP.

Incidentally the comparison between the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership is edifying: The countries of the Trio perform close to or better than the Balkans in terms of the Union's political and economic criteria, even though they were not promised membership and regional insecurity is high. The intrinsic conditions of a country are therefore decisive, and above all the political will to make the best use of the Union's instruments made available

by the agreements. Moreover, although the transition in Ukraine remains difficult and has lasted for a long time, reinforcing resistance, "*the population is taking stock of its disillusionment without calling into question democracy and its European choice, which the conflict with Russia has rather reinforced[7]*". The same is true of Georgia, which lost 20% of its territory in the wake of Russian interference. And it is the only country in the Trio to have significantly reduced petty corruption[8].

In Georgia, political polarisation remains strong and a source of tension. The Georgian Dream, the dominant party since 2012, has succumbed to the temptation to control the political scene, including by arresting an opposition leader. Faced with the risk of political destabilisation, the President of the Council launched mediation between the government and the opposition in March 2021. If the democratic game is abused in Georgia, it is captive in Moldova to an oligarchic system in which the Constitutional Court is a stakeholder. The country remains divided between pro-Russians, led by former president Igor Dodon, and pro-Europeans under the leadership of the new president Maia Sandu. However, the two camps united to block the Court in 2019! The aim was to oust a powerful oligarch, Vladimir Plahotniuc, suspected of being involved in the embezzlement of $1 billion from the Central Bank, and therefore harmful to both camps. Elected president on 24 December 2020, Maïa Sandu will however have to find a parliamentary majority to implement her pro-European reform policy. Igor Dodon's activism supported by Moscow, and the antagonism between the two camps will not make her task any easier.

Armenia has distinguished itself twice in 2018. By signing an agreement with Brussels that spares its privileged ties with Moscow. And above all by bringing a journalist to power, Nikol Pachinian, determined to modernise the country. If his "Velvet Revolution" worried Putin, he was clever enough to reassure the latter. But the military defeat by Azerbaijan sounded the death knell of his promises while placing the country in debt to Moscow. While some military leaders may have been tempted by political action, the army remained in its barracks. It is now pressing, together with the opposition, for the resignation of Nikol Pachinian. The outcome of this crisis would be in

[5] *This refers to regimes in transition between authoritarianism and democracy where, among other things, elections are not always fair, the rule of law is in the making, the judiciary is not independent, and government pressure on the opposition and the media can be strong.*

[6] *Sandra Lavenex, "The Neighbourhood policy's functionalist hubris and political myopia", The British Journal of Politics and International relations, 2017, Vol 19.*

[7] *Annie Daubenton, « Les échéances démocratiques en Ukraine : une société entre les réformes et la guerre ». In Études du CERI, n° 241-242, February 2019.*

[8] *44th in the world ranking in 2019 according to Transparency International.*

early elections, thus signalling the maturity of the country despite a military defeat. Conversely, Azerbaijan's military victory has reinforced the authoritarian regime of President Ilham Aliyev. The conflict has allowed Turkey, thanks to its armed support, to gain a solid foothold in what Erdogan considers a natural zone of influence.

With excessive polarisation, electoral campaigns dominated by oligarchic networks, reformers up against obscure forces, this situation could cast doubt on the future of reforms. Here we would be forgetting that there is little democratic tradition. The EaP countries are emerging from a long period of political suffocation and the subjugation of their sovereignty. The prospects for integration offered by the EaP, with the conditionality of reforms, now make it a key tool to help countries overcome the shackles of their history.

RESILIENCE IS CENTRAL TO THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

The Eastern Partnership thus includes four countries with "hybrid" regimes, part of whose territory is occupied by or under Russia's influence, and two with authoritarian regimes, one of which, Belarus, depends on Moscow's support in response to unabated dissent. How can profound reforms be promoted in countries with limited sovereignty where such contradictory forces are exerted[9]?

In 2016, noting the upheavals in the world and the threats, the High Representative for the CFSP, Federica Mogherini, presented a global strategy for the foreign and security policy. Three of the priorities are directly relevant to the EaP: security of the Union, resilience of States and societies in the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, and an integrated approach to crises and conflicts. Resilience is defined as "*the capacity of States and societies to reform to resist and recover from internal and external crises*".

The Commission said in 2017 that resilience covers all individuals, communities, regions and countries and the society as a whole, and that it relies on democracy, confidence in the institutions and sustainable development, to enhance the ability to rise to challenges and reform.

Resilience has become the base for five goals in the Partnership beyond 2020: "*resilient, sustainable and inclusive economies; accountable institutions; rule of law and security; environmental and climate resilience; resilient digital transformation; resilient, just and inclusive societies*." These goals can be declined into twenty programmes and were approved by the Council on 11 May 2020 and supported by the Neighbourhood Instrument. The programmes are extremely concrete - such as the declaration of assets by senior officials, the performance of the judiciary, important transport connections and a 20% reduction in urban CO_2 emissions.

The EU has allocated €3.4 billion to the EaP countries, 82% of which to the Trio, and €1.4 billion for horizontal projects in the 2014-2020 financial framework. Aid will be roughly the same in constant euros in the 2021-2027 financial framework. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU responded in April 2020 with €1.1 billion in support for health measures and recovery plans, complemented by macro-financial assistance of €1.4 billion. In addition to grants, the EU is providing low-interest loans, either directly (macro-financial assistance) or through the European Investment Bank, notably for infrastructure and SMEs.

It is Ukraine that has secured exceptional financing since 2014 with some €16 billion in budgetary aid and loans, commensurate with its economic needs and political challenges. The persistence of the conflict in Donbass and the slowness of certain reforms are impeding investments and therefore increasing the need for external financing. This has created a vicious circle in which donors, weary and worried, are resigned to supporting Kiev, since abandoning them would mean the failure of the European choice and a victory for Moscow.

In its aid, the Union is focusing on transport, with the construction of more than 10,000 km of roads and railways planned by 2030. While requirements are immense, competition is strong since China also aims to import mining and agricultural products quickly and export

[9] *See: "Limited Statehood and Conflicting and Competing orders" in EU-ListCo project.*

6

its manufactured goods by modernising its networks through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's trade is growing at the expense of the EU and Russia. While Georgia's hopes of becoming a hub have been dashed, Belarus is one of the BRI routes. Since 2000, China has given it more than €9 billion in aid and especially in loans, for infrastructure, an industrial park and fiscal balance. Challenged by Russia, the European Union is therefore facing the growing influence of China, greatly facilitated by its lack of political conditionality.

More than ten years after its launch, the EaP has obviously not been able to resolve conflicts. Moreover, patchy reforms have allowed oligarchic powers and corruption to continue to overshadow the political and economic scene. On the other hand, it has promoted plurality of opinion and modernisation, initiated reforms and pushed citizens to participate in them. And the political alternation that comes from the exercise of democracy, however imperfect, is a powerful force for change. By stimulating civil society, the EaP has developed a network of contacts, a fertile ground for the appropriation of reforms and participation in the life of the city. A new political party has just been created in Ukraine, the National Platform, whose leader, Kataryna Odarchenko, claims that it is supported exclusively by citizens and not by oligarchs.

However, the potential of the EaP remains constrained by the limited sovereignty of the Trio countries over their territory and Russia's interference. The exercise of power and functioning of the institutions are therefore ruled out in the separatist regions. In the Donbass, a memorandum of understanding was signed in Minsk on 5 September 2014 by Russia, Ukraine and the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Lugansk, under the aegis of the OSCE. Little respected, it was renewed on 12 February 2015 under the impetus of Germany and France. Apart from an exchange of prisoners, progress remains rare on the ground, where the OSCE publishes its record of daily ceasefire violations.

Security thus remains a major issue, a powerful factor in nationalism and populism. Added to this are the management and consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. As everywhere in Europe, citizens have questioned the ability of their State to deal with it. The Union's rapid financial assistance from April 2020 onwards

has been appreciated. However, there is a feeling that the same attention is not being paid to the procurement of vaccines. Thirteen Member States asked Brussels in February 2021 to facilitate the delivery of vaccines. All this is happening against the backdrop of a Russian and Chinese campaign to undermine confidence in democratic institutions and in the EU's ability to manage the pandemic and help its neighbours. All of this could take its toll on the Union's credibility, with a potentially tumultuous end to the health crisis.

Under these conditions, would resilience enable States and societies to withstand possible shocks? Yes, if citizens have access to essential services, trust in institutions and accept authority as legitimate[10]. Hence the crucial importance of the reforms promoted by the agreements with the EU in what it calls the 'fundamentals': democracy, rule of law, justice and human rights, the fight against corruption, effective institutions, and accepted authorities.

WHICH FUTURE FOR THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP: "EVERYTHING EXCEPT THE INSTITUTIONS?"

It is no secret that the Trio's representatives were disappointed by the 10th anniversary of the EaP in 2019 and by the objectives agreed in the Council one year later. While resilience is a fully shared objective, it remains, in their view, too limited in terms of facilitating their European aspirations, with no time frame or long-term vision, while their needs are great and regional insecurity high. The Trio's foreign ministers wrote to Brussels and the Member States on 2 February 2021, asking for deeper cooperation in areas such as energy, digital, green economy, cyber security, justice and security. As well as additional tools for integration into the EU's internal market. The European Parliament has called for a clear strategy and a long-term vision, as did Euronest, the EaP's Joint Parliamentary Assembly.

The agreements with the Trio could be further improved following advances in their integration and, above all, brought into line with the policies adopted by the Union since 2009. Ideas are not lacking in areas as diverse as trade, energy, environment and security. In response to the Trio's request, the European Commission plans to

[10] Cadier, M. Capasso, K. Eickhoff, "Researching resilience", EU ListCo project.

propose a new reform agenda for 2025 at the summit scheduled for autumn 2021, in five priority areas under the theme of resilience: digital transformation, green transition, fair and inclusive societies, economies that benefit all, and stronger "fundamentals". This proposal is expected to be supported by an investment plan, which is essential in view of the limited sums available under the Neighbourhood Instrument. It will be all the more necessary since a country like Ukraine could fall victim to the Green Pact via the carbon adjustment mechanism on the Union's borders.

Beyond a desirable adaptation of the agreements, a question remains: what is the Eastern Partnership's ultimate objective? From the outset, it was a compromise between those Member States that wished to offer the Trio, as well as the Western Balkans, the promise of EU membership, and those who were opposed to it for reasons both internal to the Union and to an extension of its borders in a difficult geopolitical context. A close political association and integration into EU policies was the result of this compromise. This approach raises the question of further integration.

Pressure from the Trio in this direction is strong, encouraged by Member States, notably Lithuania, Poland and Sweden. The President of Georgia, Salome Zurabishvili, has even announced that her country is preparing to apply for membership of the Union in 2024. And during his first visit to Brussels on 7 June 2019, the Ukrainian president declared that Ukraine's accession to the Union was his priority. The European Parliament recalled in a resolution on 11 February 2021 that "*Ukraine has a European perspective under Article 49 (TEU) and can apply for membership of the Union*".

The arguments of the opponents to the prospect of membership are all the more admissible since the Union faces profound problems which the extension of its borders to the East would accentuate and to which Russia has become hostile. How can we also ignore the fact that some groups of citizens would be opposed to it? As was the case in the Netherlands in a referendum in April 2016, where only 430,000 signatories blocked the agreement with Ukraine, which had been ratified by all Member States, including the Dutch parliament. It was feared

that the agreement would open the door to military aid and thus increase insecurity. A Council declaration was necessary for The Hague to confirm its ratification.

As Pierre Hassner writes, "*achieving power through norms can never prevail on its own, it depends on the interests and respective weight of the actors as well as on their values*". The interests are contradictory here and the geopolitical weight of the Union is relative. Can the values carried by the Union compensate for its "non-power" when societies are more likely to claim their autonomy, as in Belarus? Perhaps, unless the latter succumb, for a time, to an aggressive nationalism under the instruments of repression.

Although it is not *a priori* in the nature of the European project to determine its borders on the continent, a realistic Union should therefore make it clear that its borders end where the Eastern Partnership begins. To stop fostering an illusion and generating frustration, while fuelling Eurosceptic rhetoric. But the Union is too divided to define a long-term vision. The Trio's authorities must therefore focus on implementing these complex agreements, with the adoption of some 100 European directives. Then negotiate progressive additions, as the autumn 2021 summit should confirm. These agreements are indeed ambitious since, once implemented, some 70% of the *acquis communautaire* will have been integrated into the national legal order. This is the attitude that the Council has followed until now.

The Union should therefore aim to gradually integrate the Trio into the European Economic Area. This large-scale project would give concrete form to the initial idea of the neighbourhood policy with the East, summarised at the time by the President of the Commission, Romano Prodi, as "everything but the institutions". However, this perspective can only be realised if the Trio maintains full confidence in the Union, so that Russia does not reinforce its hegemony.

The regular reminder of the prospect of Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO is not likely to ease tensions with Russia. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, when receiving the Ukrainian Prime Minister on 9 February 2021, said: "*NATO decided on Ukraine's membership in 2008.*

8

We comply with it. We will continue to support Ukraine in its Euro-Atlantic aspirations." Without abandoning this perspective, there is no hope of reducing tensions and putting the continent's security on a different track.

However, Russia holds the key to solutions to the various conflicts. Dialogue would therefore be highly desirable, even if Minister Sergei Lavrov has closed this path because of Europe's concerns about human rights. Moscow's recent attitude augurs difficult times as it appears that power has been "taken over by structures of force[11]". Especially since its aggressiveness is amplified by the intrinsic weakness of the regime and its fear of internal opposition. Although Russia is in slow demographic and economic decline, it would be risky to count on a change in Moscow where repression, supported by digital authoritarianism, is possibly only in its infancy.

Faced with this situation, the call in some circles for a containment of Russia through a hard-line policy could very well lead to a new Cold War in the absence of the Union's strategic autonomy, as Marc Franco points out. Yet the EU and Russia share many common interests. Not the least of which is to prevent Moscow from becoming even more dependent on Beijing. It is therefore time for the EU to engage "selectively" on issues of common interest, according to the principle established by the Council on Russia policy in March 2016. After all, if it was able to sign a pre-agreement on investment with China despite the situation of the Uighurs and Hong Kong, it should *a fortiori* be able to find a consensus, even *a minima*, to open a dialogue with Moscow. Beyond that, it is a new Helsinki conference that the European continent needs.

[11] *Kirill Martynov, Le Monde, 23 February 2021.*

Višegrad Insight outlined four scenarios for the EaP: pragmatic integration into the Union, enhanced Russian hegemony, civic emancipation and a Union that recognises Russia's interests on its margins. As things stand, let us rule out the latter scenario. As for Russian influence, it is indeed greater in Minsk and could become greater elsewhere via problems that Moscow would opportunely use. Civic emancipation could perhaps counterbalance it. Gradual integration into the Union remains the most plausible scenario. Because the EaP, turning its back on the initial neighbourhood policy, is a flexible framework in which each country can choose its own path in a differentiated and adapted way. Thus, with Belarus, where neither the leader of the opposition, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, nor the European Union is calling on Minsk to choose between two camps but to open up a national dialogue.

In these circumstances, the European Union should rather continue to strengthen its assistance, including its security programmes - separate from NATO – and extend them to its partners. If it fails to reduce its divisions, it risks leaving Moscow holding the reins for a long time to come. To solve this problem, the "Barnier method" used during Brexit could be tried, as Elvire Fabry proposed for China. A Task Force would establish a transparent dialogue with the Member States to create a community of interests and define a common strategy in confidence - and build strategic autonomy to reduce its geopolitical marginalisation in the Eastern Partnership.

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