

Experiencing the European Union in the South Caucasus and Eastern Europe

Abstract

The Eastern periphery of the European Union is a place Russia calls home, and it is where the EU is present on many levels through the Eastern Partnership. This article aims to contribute to the academic debate on European identity and identification with Europe by showing that 'experiencing Europe' in the Eastern Partnership countries means experiencing the EU both as a normative and geopolitical actor, but also experiencing the fear of losing the 'traditional way of life' and customs. This paper shows that the EU is not perceived in the same way in the different Eastern Partnership states, rather in many nuances of perceptions by the citizens of those respective countries. These differences do not derive from geographical demarcations of the EaP, i.e. the new Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, but relate to local circumstances and identities. Based on the theoretical framework and research, the article explains that the EU's normative power is sometimes channelled by the EU to promote its geopolitical interest in the region. The main research methods used are process tracing, thematic analysis of interviews and questionnaires conducted with young people from several EaP countries, and of surveys conducted by internationally recognised entities. Another method used is content analysis of the documents issued by Euronest and by the European Commission. By applying these methods, the article shows that although the Eastern Partnership countries are under the same umbrella, the citizens within them perceive the EU differently from country to country.

Key words: EU, normative power, geopolitical actor, Eastern Partnership, experiencing the EU

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Introduction

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was launched in 2003 with the vision of creating a ring of countries sharing EU values and strengthening the prosperity and security of the region (European Commission official website 2022). Essentially, the ENP encompasses three main lines of action: democracy promotion, security cooperation and market integration. The real domestic impact of the EU, and subsequently of the ENP on the EaP countries, relies on the adaptation cost and on the willingness and capacity of domestic actors to adapt (Borzel 2011, 400). For countries facing extremely high adaptation costs, like the Eastern neighbours, the prospect of EU membership could be the only reason to accept the costs, although the ENP does not openly address this, nor does the Copenhagen Criteria. The current Commissioner for Budget and Administration, Johannes Hahn, described the ENP in 2015, 12 years after its launch, as purposefully ambiguous: “[the ENP] was deliberately built on a <<constructive ambiguity>> and meant to do the difficult job of using the transformative power of Europe without explicitly offering the big prize: membership” (Hahn 2015). The implications of this ambiguity are easily recognisable twenty years after the birth of the ENP, seen in the relations between the EU and its Eastern neighbours. On 7 May 2009, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was launched as a tool and concept to improve the ENP in Eastern Europe. The six countries part of the European Union’s Eastern Partnership —Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—have already experienced, in different ways, many changes since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the latest enlargement waves of the European Union, but the added value of the EaP, as advanced by its founding documents, is to support positive changes politically, economically, and from a civic point of view, and to ensure the Eastern Neighbourhood’s deeper integration into the EU.

Although perhaps ambiguously, the EU “hits beyond its borders”, as stated by German political scientist Tanja Borzel, it has real and tangible effects on many EU but also non-EU citizens. According to Gawrich et al., this Europeanisation process can be divided into three categories: membership Europeanisation (the EU’s impact on Member States), enlargement Europeanisation (the EU’s impact on candidate countries) and neighbourhood Europeanisation (the EU’s impact on countries which are not candidates), (Gawrich et al. 2009, 5). This article focuses on the latter category, and analyses the extent to which the EU’s interactions in its neighbourhood brings Europeanisation to EaP citizens. We try to catch a glimpse of how Europe in general and the EU in particular are perceived and understood in this new and complex periphery. The article also shows that although the

EU's approach is generally similar in all EaP countries, experiencing the EU differs depending on local circumstances and varied perceptions and expectations. Experiencing the EU under the umbrella of the EaP is not a homogeneous phenomenon, not even in countries located in the same region. It is important to be mindful of the fact that experiencing Europe in the EaP means experiencing Europe in a region where most of the population is fluent in Russian and most countries have a direct border with Russia. In addition, many of the EaP countries are affected by enduring frozen conflicts or recently reactivated conflicts: Moldova is marked by the unresolved issue of Transnistria, Armenia and Azerbaijan are in conflict over the Nagorno Karabakh region, and Georgia is dealing with separatism in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The situation in Ukraine is also extremely complicated, as shown by the significant recent examples of conflict escalation and unrest in society (the Orange Revolution, Euromaidan, annexation of Crimea), especially because of the country's ambition to follow a European path. The peak of these evolutions is the full-scale war unleashed by the Russian Federation in February 2022. This makes experiencing the EU even more complex than in other neighbourhood regions of the EU. It is also important to acknowledge that, because of its hybrid nature, the EU's foreign relations bear the mark of Member States' interests. As such, experiencing Europe in the EaP also bears the mark of the different bilateral relations and interests of EU Member States in the region.

In this article, the arguments are structured as follows: firstly, based on desk research, I briefly review and discuss ways in which Europe can be conceptualised. Secondly, I present the strengths and limitations of the methodology I employed. Thirdly, I point to the results obtained after I applied the methodology. Finally, I summarise the different ways of experiencing Europe in the EaP countries and point to further avenues for future research.

Ways to consider Europe

Trying to conceptualise and define Europe and being European is not an easy job, as Europe is a maze of frontiers and political fragmentations (Morris 2006, 57). There are many ways to experience Europe, belong to Europe and conceptualise Europe, from an unpretentious geographical view (a continent) and on to more complex understandings, e.g. Europe as a historical entity, a supranational union, a normative power, a body formed by its core and margins, etc. Approaching Europe as a core encircled by its margins is a challenging thing to do, because, first of all, in order to define the margins, one needs to ask where Europe's core is. The features of belonging to the core are

debatable, and none of them give a definitive answer. The geographical centre of Europe depends on the delineation of the borders of Europe, especially if remote islands are included as the extreme points of Europe. According to the first official declaration back in 1775, the town of Suchowola in Poland was considered the first geometric centre of Europe by calculating equal distances from the extreme points of the continent (Sobiekrajski 1775), but several locations have since claimed to host this symbolic centre. As far as the EU is concerned, the French National Geographic Institute has been calculating the changing location of what it estimates to be the geographical centre of the EU since 1987, when the centre of the European Community was considered to be in the middle of France, the village of Saint-André-le-Coq (Jaiswal 2018). Following the accession of Croatia, one of the latest interpretations of the EU's core gravitated around the Frankfurt area (near the river Schulzengrundbach), where, incidentally, the headquarters of the European Central Bank was established. After the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU, the new geographical mid-point was considered to be Gadheim near Würzburg, Bavaria (Connolly 2017). Jaques Rupnik has emphasised that “although the centre of Europe might be difficult to identify, it has several peripheries” (Rupnik, 1989).

Geography has its relevance in studying the dynamics between core and margins, and how citizens experience these dynamics, but it is merely one of the criteria used in emphasising the periphery. The periphery is not only a terrestrial or physical entity, but also a normative and ideological aspect and a matter of perception. For instance, for Professor Frank Schimmelfennig, being European means “experiencing the regionally integrated system of liberal democracies, regionalism, regulated transnational markets and democratic constitutionalism” (Schimmelfennig 2012, 10).

The literature in the field reveals that one of the first reactions of many non-EU citizens, including from EaP countries, when discussing Europe is to draw a “conceptual link between ‘Europe’ and ‘the EU’, often by agreeing or not agreeing with this overlap”. Another common reaction is to use ‘Europe’ as “shorthand for the EU, to which they do not yet belong” (Armbruster et al. 2010, 890). The idyllic theoretical idea and motto of the EU is *in varietate concordia* (united in diversity), but practice has shown many times that the glue that keeps the EU together is an ongoing and never-ending process of everyday negotiation on everything. The EU is a complex and hybrid entity, a collection of different identities showcasing an impressive and unique melange. Institutionally, the core is considered a mixture between Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg, where the Commission, together with the Council (representing the Member States), and the European Parliament

(representing the citizens of the EU) decide on policies and budget allocations for the implementation of each policy.

The EU as a normative power vs. the EU as a geopolitical power

When considering the EU's role in the world over several decades, many scholars have debated the civilian power of the EU (CPE) and its foreign policy objectives (Orbie 2006). In parallel to the CPE, other concepts have evolved because of the shortcomings of this notion. One of the problems with the concept of civilian power is what Manners (2002, p.239) considers "unhealthy concentration on how much like a state the EU looks". Recent literature focuses on the normative potential of the EU (Niemann, Wekker 2010), taking the focus from the empirical weight of the EU's institutions "towards including cognitive processes, with both substantive and symbolic components" (Manners 2000, p.239).

The EU is considered by many scholars a normative power in intent, process, and impact. The EU as a normative power means that it has the ability to define what passes as 'normal' in world politics and of course at its periphery (Manners 2002, 263). The EU has a natural tendency to consider itself as a normative power since, in the treaties and founding documents that emerged after WW2, the EU underlines the core principles for internal and external affairs: peace, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. In this sense, scholars like Joseph Nye explain that the normative power of the EU in the periphery is interconnected with the concept of 'soft power', understood as the ability to outline what others want through an extensive power of attraction and not through intimidation or aggression (Nye 2004, 5). In this respect, the norms and principles important for the EU are expected to be embraced by others without unfriendly intervention, because coercion would diminish the legitimacy of the EU and of its values. On the other hand, although the EU depicts itself as a normative power, unilateral policy emulation in third countries happens rarely, and in specific and isolated policy fields (Lavenex, Ucarer 2004, 420-421). In most cases, for third countries to embrace EU norms, the balance between the carrots received from the EU and the implementation costs and risks has to be positive.

The fact that the EU is seen by scholars such as Manners (2002), Diez (2005), and Tocci (2008) as a normative power more than as a civilian power highlights the importance of analysing the perceptions and experience of citizens from the EaP, and the abstract dimension of EU foreign policy at the periphery.

The normative angle is also preferred in this article as an analysis

framework of experiencing the EU in the Eastern Neighbourhood because it emphasises the under-explored cognitive and ideational dimension of EU foreign policy (Niemann, Wekker 2010).

In many academic debates, identifying with Europe and with the EU means also identifying with the “security and strategic culture” (Rogers, 2009) that the EU promotes. Culture binds together peoples and countries and is also a way of overcoming threats. “More specifically, the term ‘strategic culture’ seems to imply a set of traditions, values, patterns of behaviour, common achievements and history and methods of problem solving and decision- making” (EUISS DGRIS 2021, 2). Perhaps one of the highest levels of confirmation of the importance and positive effects of this strategic culture was the fact that The Nobel Peace Prize 2012 was awarded to the European Union “for over six decades of contribution to the advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe” (The Nobel Peace Prize 2012). This attribute of the EU can contrast, on an identity level, the perceptions of citizens from conflict-torn EaP countries of what it means to be European.

Academia has also put forward criticism against the idea of normative power of the EU. Hyde-Price considers that the EU imposes its norms on its Eastern neighbours mirroring a hegemon (Hyde-Price 2006). Another critical view is that the EU’s normative power is not based on universal norms, but that the EU advances its own norms and then claims they are universal, and projects its internal solutions to external problems (Bicchi 2006, 287). This viewpoint portrays the EU as rather imperialistic and not trying to change or improve something in the EaP countries, but rather satisfying its need for security in the area.

An important aspect of the normative power of the EU in the EaP countries is the lack of reflexivity, or the fact that real reflexivity is starting to be considered by formulating policy changes very late. Reflexivity requires that the EU pays attention to the effects of the norms imposed in each of the six Eastern Partnership countries, makes an evaluation, and then applies the necessary changes to improve the norms and achieve the required benchmarks. An important aspect of reflexivity is the ability to be self-critical and change sub-optimal policies (Niemann, Wekker 2010, 20) and this should be especially done by the EU in an area as complicated as the Eastern periphery, where the consequence of embracing EU norms by the EaP countries is the aggravation of relations with Russia. But although the European Commission issued reports on the dynamics between the EU and EaP countries, these reports have focused more on what the neighbourhood countries under the EaP umbrella have been doing ‘wrong’ or insufficiently,

and less on what the EU must do to improve its approach (Boonstra, Shapovalova 2010). Korosteleva (2011) also speaks about more continuity than change in the attitude of the EU towards the EaP.

Further proof of the lack of EU reflexivity is the “one size fits all” approach that the EU has used for many years in interacting with this region. Scholars such as Niemann and Wekker wonder if the EU is a real normative power in this region, using as an argument the fact that it promotes double standards (Niemann, Wekker 2010, 5). One example of a double standard offered is criticising the electoral process in the Republic of Moldova while the OSCE has also identified many irregularities in EU member states: in Belgium, the OSCE considered that the electoral process “calls into question the impartiality of the adjudicating body” (OSCE/ODIHR 2007). Moreover, as concerns France, it called for changes so that international observers can participate in the electoral process (OSCE/ODIHR 2007), and, in Poland, a problem was found in the lack of balance in media coverage.

Another important view that is supported in the academia when discussing experiencing the EU in the EaP countries is the geopolitical angle, where the EU focuses more on its interests in the region and less on values (Crombois 2017). Although the EU “is relatively new to the game of power politics and does not necessarily fit within existing classifications of the great powers” (Palm 2021), this does not mean that the EU does not play a geopolitical role in its Eastern neighbourhood and in relation to Russia. Since 2002, the European Union’s goal in its Eastern neighbourhood has been to ensure that it is surrounded by democracies that uphold the rule of law, while maintaining market economies and open societies. After the invasion of Crimea and the Ukrainian crisis, the fact that the Eastern Partnership is a geopolitical instrument for Brussels is considered by scholars like Cadier (2019) as common sense. Moreover, in the 2016 EU Global Strategy, “principled pragmatism” was introduced as a new EU foreign policy concept, suggesting that the EU values might not always take precedence over realpolitik interests (Mihalache 2016). In my view, these two narratives are not conflicting, but coexist.

Short methodological description and interpretation of results

This article is connected to a broader research for my PhD thesis focusing on the importance of the periphery and perceptions on the dynamics of EU-Russia relations. In it, the main research methods used are qualitative, as this type of method “brings out more detail and nuance from a case than can be found by reducing it to quantitative measure” (Barkin 2008), and this

is what this article shows: The nuance of experiencing the European Union in the EaP countries. By using a mix of research tools that complement each other, such as desk research, process tracing, interpretation of interviews, questionnaires and content analysis of documents, this article gives a glimpse of the hybrid and heterogeneous way in which Europe is experienced in the Eastern Partnership countries, and also of the way the EU reacts to the Eastern Partnership perceptions.

Limitations of the chosen methodological tools

The content analysis in this article follows the steps that align with the method described by Taylor-Power and Renner (2003), namely, following a series of stages: examination and multiple reading of the texts chosen, identifying themes and patterns, grouping these themes into categories by comparing to see which identified components are similar, grouping them into the same categories, and, finally, ordering these thematic categories by importance. Time constraints affected the volume of documents that could be analysed with content analysis.

Because in documenting this paper, I considered it extremely important not only to rely on document analysis and desk research, but also to interact with people in the region additionally to the already mentioned methods, this article also supplements with semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. From this ambition came the greatest satisfaction as well as the greatest challenges. The key participants in the interviews were to be people involved in the foreign policy process and in civil society. Consequently, I carried out four research interviews. Time constraints made it impossible to reach a larger number of respondents. This was amplified by the fact that the political and social situation in Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan was complicated, which made people less open to this type of research activity. Additionally, the pandemic and the corresponding restrictions added to the difficulties. Another important setback was that Azerbaijan was not covered by the interviews and questionnaires. Because of all these limitations, sampling could not be performed in a satisfactory manner, the number of respondents was reduced (35) and the answers come mostly from young people between 22 and 36 years old. Therefore, even if the results of the questionnaires are evocative, as they reflect ways of experiencing Europe, it is impossible to depict them as scientific truth. To fill the gaps of the research and to base my conclusions on data as comprehensively as possible, I consulted the survey reports from 2020 by *EU Neighbours East* in the EU's six Eastern partner countries, including Azerbaijan, which used a representative sample of 1000

people per country, with the aim of investigating and better understanding the opinion that the EU's Eastern partner countries have about the European Union and the EU's cooperation with their country.

Results interpretation and short discussion

The results I gathered show that experiencing Europe is sometimes a paradox, “a tension between universal and national values” (Ifversen 2019). The EU is not perceived or felt homogeneously around the Eastern Partnership: Similarities and common themes in perception are not related to geographical position, but more to political aspects and economic incentives. Therefore, of the five countries researched, similar answers and perceptions have been found in Georgia, in the Caucasus region, along with Moldova and Ukraine, which are in different geographic regions. Experiencing Europe is inevitably reciprocated by the EU's evolving experience of the EaP countries, and, as such, the EaP countries have begun to influence the EU in changing its “one size fits all” approach.

The interpretation of results is divided into two categories showing bivalent and contrasting interpretations. By analysing Euronest and European Commission communication documents on the one hand, and the data from my interviews and the *EU Neighbours East* surveys on the other, this article offers a glimpse of what experiencing Europe means for the different stakeholders.

Interpretation of the content analysis results

The Euronest Parliamentary Assembly is the inter-parliamentary umbrella in which 60 members of the European Parliament and 50 members of the national parliaments of Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia participate for closer political and economic bonds with the EU. As of 2010, Belarus does not participate in the activities of the Assembly (Euronest Parliamentary Assembly 2022). For this article, the following Euronest resolutions were analysed: “*Resolution on the future of the Trio Plus Strategy 2030: building a future of Eastern Partnership*”, “*Resolution on Parliamentary oversight as a tool to strengthen democracy, accountability and effectiveness of state institutions in the Eastern Partner countries*” from the 8th Ordinary Session held in 2019 in Georgia, and “*Resolution on Security challenges in the Eastern Partnership countries and enhancing the role of the EU in addressing them*” from the 7th Ordinary Session held in Belgium in 2018.

The content analysis results of the Euronest resolutions show that, from the point of view of EU and EaP legislators, experiencing Europe or being

part of Europe means acceding to the EU, sharing EU values, and having strong parliamentary oversight. The main themes revealed are differentiation, resilience, EU values, upgraded reforms, and economic support. All resolutions focus on the need for a differentiated approach from the EU towards EaP countries *based on the “more for more and less for less” principle*, but not necessarily in a bilateral format (as shown, for example, by the interviews), rather in a trio format for the associated countries or even a trio plus format including Armenia. This differentiated approach advanced by the resolutions of Euronest brings together the benefits of the existing multilateral framework of the EaP, e.g. organising high-level ministerial meetings, which at a bilateral level would be more difficult to achieve (Deen et al. 2021), with the possibility to offer more for countries having higher ambitions, thus boosting their motivation to continue reforms. Moreover, the proposed Trio format is presented as complementary to the EaP and as a geopolitical instrument. Resilience in the sense of reducing societal vulnerabilities, mediation of conflicts, countering disinformation and cybersecurity resilience is also revealed as important in the Euronest resolutions. The common values theme is also important, and includes subthemes like fighting corruption, independence of parliaments, diversity, rule of law, and civil society.

Content analysis of the European Commission Joint Communication (Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020 - Reinforcing Resilience - an Eastern Partnership that delivers for all) shows that the focus for the Commission is on resilience, reforms, and accountability, while the differentiation theme and common values theme are secondary. The resilience theme is dominant and is encountered in all the EU-EaP countries' cooperation fields: climate resilience, border management resilience, energy, societal resilience (investing in people), cyber resilience, and strategic communication resilience. In fact, the Commission proposes strengthening resilience as an overruling objective. Regarding the differentiation theme, contrary to the Euronest resolutions and the interviews, the Commission considers that the actual policies under the EaP have respected the differentiation principle and that further differentiation steps will be pursued in the future (European Commission 2020, pp. 2-4).

These two different interpretations, of the Commission on the one hand, and the European Parliament and EaP national parliaments (Euronest assembly) on the other, clearly show the coexistence of the normative and geopolitical approaches of the EU in the EaP region.

Interpretation of interviews and results of the surveys

The persons interviewed expressed the need for enhanced bilateral relations between the EU and each of the EaP countries, with a general multilateral and common framework considered by the respondents as not having an effective impact. When asked about the Trio Strategy 2030, words like “too little, too late” were offered (Galbur 2020).

When talking about ways of experiencing Europe or the multilevel dimensions of Europe in the everyday lives of citizens, the interviewed persons concurred that the EU does not impact the daily lives of Georgians, Moldovans, Ukrainians, and Armenians, with the exception of the financial benefits deriving from different EU programs or from trade. The *acquis communautaire* and the reforms asked for by the EU interfere little with the everyday life of Eastern Neighbourhood citizens, yet, they do trigger fears of losing what is generally considered the ‘traditional way of life’.

In the interview with Andrei Galbur (former deputy Prime-Minister/ Minister of Foreign Affairs & European Integration), a paradoxical issue came to light about how Moldovans experience the EU. The case of Moldova is in certain ways special in the Eastern Neighbourhood, Moldova being a non-EU member with a largely significant part of its population enjoying the benefits of EU citizenship via Romanian passports. This fact would make it natural to assume that Moldovan citizens feel more closely attached to the EU. This assumption has, however, proven to be naive. In Moldova, up until the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022, the population was highly polarised, and the results of the last presidential elections (in November 2020) show that the pro-EU and pro-Russia camps are divided almost equally, Maia Sandu - the pro-European presidential candidate - won the second round by a margin of 7 percent (Euractiv 2020). Pro-EU Moldavans are supporters of the European Union values, however, a number of them consider that these values should not be imposed, but embraced in their own specific national way. The war started by Russia in Ukraine has altered the way people in the region and in Moldova perceive the EU and this deserves to be analysed in detail in a future research. A hint in this sense is the survey carried out by Magenta Consulting on March 2022, immediately after President Maia Sandu announced that the government had officially submitted a formal request for European Union membership. The results of the Magenta survey show that 61% of the respondents support the country’s European path, an increase from the 52% before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Magenta Consulting 2022).

On the question regarding whether the Eastern Partnership was an element of stability in the region, the interviews revealed differing opinions. The response given in the interview with Bohdan Ferens from Ukraine was

particularly evocative: “I remember at the first Euronest meeting I attended, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan were having territorial problems, and I thought how lucky we are in Ukraine not to have such issues. A few years later, when Maidan happened, Russia illegally annexed Crimea and unleashed a war in the Donbass.” (Bohdan Ferens 2021). This opinion is paralleled by others in academia – Diez, Albert and Stetter argued that, as far as Russia is concerned, the EU has been “generative rather than ameliorative of new conflictual dispositions”. There was also a neutral opinion from former Georgian MP Dimitri Tskitishvili (2020), who stated that the “EaP did not create problems”. These answers are in line with the value that citizens from Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia and Belarus indicated in the *EU Neighbours East* surveys as the most important personal value: peace/security.

All interviews showed that while the EU carries out valuable projects in the EaP region, it does not know how to effectively communicate their success to the local populations.

Furthermore, Arthur Khachataryan, MP in the National Assembly of Armenia, mentioned the disappointment among the Armenian population caused by the “very passive attitude of the Europeans during the last war”.

The *EU Neighbours East* surveys are also very insightful, and show interesting trends. The surveys demonstrate that perceptions of the EU are not consistent, and that the differences are not geographically related. Positive perceptions of the EU were depicted in Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. On the other hand, the results also show a large proportion of neutral views towards the EU within the same countries. Based on the profiling of results, neutral perceptions are more common among middle-aged citizens with a low to medium level of education, and the unemployed or less active in society. Holders of positive views of the EU tend to be younger, educated, urban citizens who take their information from TV and the internet.

Figure 1: How the EU is perceived in the EaP states (2020)

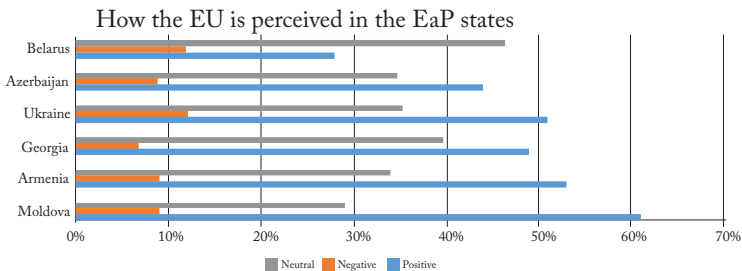


Chart produced after comparing data by EU Neighbours East Surveys for the six EaP countries

From the many instances measured by the surveys conducted by the *EU Neighbours East* project, question two and question three are particularly meaningful for this research. The answers to the question *What values are associated with the EU?* are evocative for the way people experience the EU in the EaP.

While for Moldova ‘economic prosperity’ was the first value with which the respondents identified the EU, in Armenia and Georgia it was ‘freedom of speech’, and in Azerbaijan ‘the rule of law’. For Ukraine, ‘human rights’ and ‘economic prosperity’ shared the same top percentage (81%); for Georgia, ‘economic prosperity’ and ‘human rights’ were close to ‘freedom of speech’ (78% *vs* 80%). For respondents from Belarus, the first value strongly associated with the EU was ‘economic prosperity’ (69%), immediately followed by freedom of religion (68%) and freedom of media (67%). These results are paralleled by the *Freedom Status* (2020) calculated by Freedom House, according to which EaP countries are ‘partly free’, with the exception of Belarus and Azerbaijan, which are labelled as ‘not free’.

Figure 2: *Freedom Status* of EaP countries

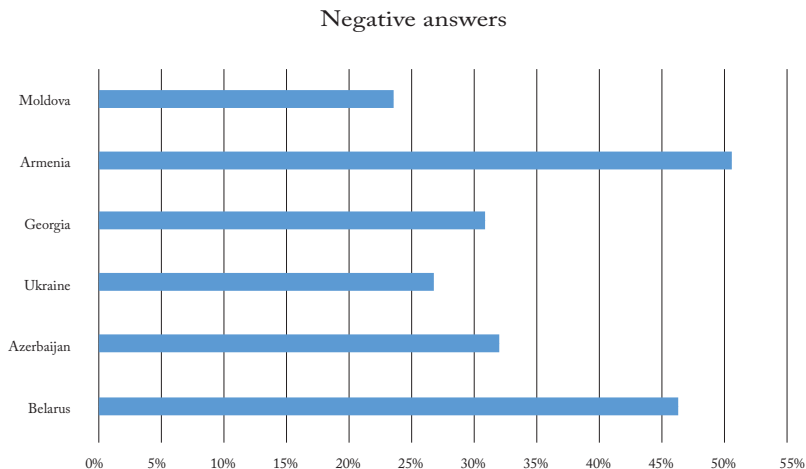
Country, 2020	Political Rights	Civil liberties	Freedom Status
Moldova	3	4	Partly free
Ukraine	3	3	Partly free
Georgia	3	3	Partly free
Belarus	7	6	Not free
Armenia	4	4	Partly free
Azerbaijan	7	6	Not free

* 1 represents the most free and 7 the least free rating

It is meaningful to remark that the respondents from Moldova (the country with the highest percentage of positive attitude towards the EU) are also the most pragmatic. According to the *EU Neighbours East* data, the respondents from Moldova are the only ones from the EaP countries for whom the most important personal value is the same as the first value with which they strongly associate the EU: ‘economic prosperity’.

For the question “*To what extent do you agree with the statement: the EU fosters the preservation of traditional values in our society?*,” the ‘not at all’ and ‘not really’ answers are important to understand the way people are experiencing Europe. The answers show that in all the EaP countries, there is - to several degrees - a perception that the EU does not protect national traditions. These perceptions are shared less in countries with high European aspirations and appear higher in countries such as Belarus, which in June 2021 suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership (EU Council 2021).

Figure 3: Negative answers to the statement: “The EU fosters the preservation of traditional values in EaP countries” (2020)



** Chart produced after comparing data by EU Neighbours East Surveys for the six EaP countries*

The fear of losing the traditional way of life is also present among the population with positive attitudes towards the EU, and not only among citizens with negative or neutral attitudes.

By looking at the numbers in *Figure 4* and comparing them with the profiling data provided by the *EU Neighbours East*, we can better identify the type of citizens with positive and neutral attitudes towards the EU who consider that the EU is not going to preserve their national values. Here, we can also see that the results are not uniform. While in Georgia there is a big difference between the population with a good image of the EU (the highly educated urban population of all ages), and the population with a neutral image of the EU (the middle- aged population with low to medium levels of education from rural areas), in Armenia, the holders of a positive view and ones with a neutral view have a similar socio-demographic profile. Furthermore, in Moldova, the most characteristic feature that separates the positive- view holders from the neutral ones is that, in the first category, nearly all are native Romanian speakers, while in the second, the majority are Russian speakers. In Belarus, the positive-view holders are under 34 years old, living in the capital city or at the Western border near Poland, while the population with neutral views is more rural and elderly.

Figure 4. Total of negative answers to the statement “The EU fosters the preservation of traditional values in EaP countries (2020)” among the population with a positive and neutral image of the EU

Country	Total of <i>no</i> and <i>not at all</i> answers among the population with a positive image of the EU	Total of <i>no</i> and <i>not at all</i> answers among the population with a neutral image of the EU
Armenia	43%	56%
Ukraine	13%	33%
Belarus	41%	48%
Moldova	11%	35%
Georgia	19%	37%
Azerbaijan	14%	23%

** Table realised after comparing the data offered by EU Neighbours East Surveys for the six EaP countries.*

Conclusions and future research avenues

The overall conclusion is that “experiencing Europe” in the EaP countries is not homogenous. Nor is the EU’s perception of how to approach this region. The whole process of experiencing Europe is a hybrid and dynamic one that changes depending on the context, local circumstances, and on the EU’s actions and reactions. The focus on resilience and the geopolitical approach of the European Commission, revealed by the content analysis, is in agreement with the value that citizens from some EaP countries identify as most important for them - peace/security, but not with the values that citizens associate more with the EU. Nonetheless, the lack of differentiation and the lack of a tailored approach for each country, a fact that transpired after analysing the contents of the Communication, is contrary to the need for a bilateral format identified during the interviews. The Euronest Resolutions are more in line with the results of the surveys and the interviews showing that the European Parliament and the parliaments of EaP countries, as elected bodies, are rather more closely connected to the reality on the ground and to the will of the citizens. The results also show the importance of reflexivity: if the EU wants citizens of any EaP country to consider themselves truly European or to embrace the European experience and values, then the EU should consider them as such and engage with them accordingly.

The hybrid understanding of what Europe means creates different

expectations and personal dreams for citizens at the periphery. For many, Europe is the promise of a better life, a better income, better treatment from state institutions, along with the promise not to live in a society where corruption is widespread, echoing the emotional words of President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen: “*Europe is a dream. A dream that always was. A dream born from tragedy. But, today, that dream shines brightest not only here in this historic place [the EP]. It shines brightest in the hearts and minds of the people of Kiev and Kharkiv, of Odessa and Mariupol [...]. And it shines brightest in the eyes of all those young Ukrainians who have found a refuge in Europe – a home away from home.*” (Von der Leyen 2022)

Future research

Given the limitations of this article, it is important to extend the research for a comprehensive view of what experiencing Europe means in the EaP countries, and to address the new challenges of the region. Important recent or ongoing events can substantially alter present and future perceptions of the EU. The full-scale war that the Russian Federation is waging against Ukraine undoubtedly affects, in numerous and profound ways, how the populations of the EaP countries see the EU, creating a momentum for the prospect of EU membership (“catastrotunity”). Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine formally applied for EU Membership in 2022 during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and formal reactions from the EU are soon expected. Another relevant development is the ‘wider Europe’ idea revived by French President Emmanuel Macron during a recent keynote speech at the European Parliament, an idea that appears to side-step the EaP framework altogether.

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