SMS

Eastern neighbours, contested spaces

The EU and its eastern neighbours (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) have long been interdependent. Events in the east – or south – not only affect EU foreign policy, but also the functioning of the Union in multiple domains; from trade to energy to migration flows. The region is home to multiple sources of tension, and has also seen the implementation of EU sanctions (on Belarus and Russia).

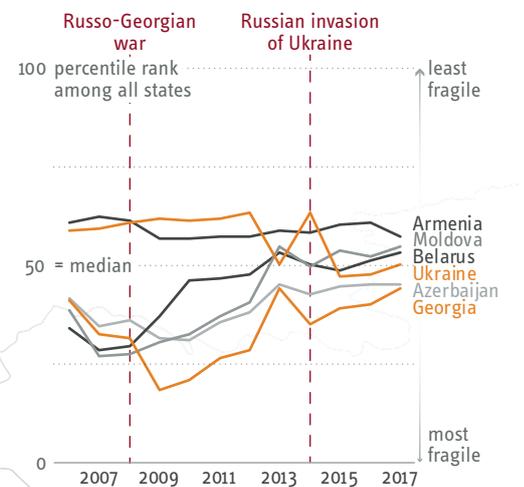This SMS compares the eastern neighbours' relationships with the EU and Russia, respectively.

What is clear is that neither Russia nor the EU is dominant in the region: the Union tends to be the bigger player in trade or soft power terms, but Moscow's hard power blunts the EU's advantages.

Conflicts

The region has experienced four 'frozen' conflicts since the early 1990s. But in recent years, two further conflicts – in Crimea and Donbas – have been added to the list.

In response, the EU has deployed civilian missions in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, but their primary objective is to help prevent further outbreaks of violence. Given Russia's strong military presence and the region's high levels of instability, there is currently not much cause for optimism.

State fragility

Russo-Georgian war — Russian invasion of Ukraine

100 percentile rank among all states — least fragile

50 = median

Armenia
Moldova
Belarus
Ukraine
Azerbaijan
Georgia

0 — most fragile

2007 2009 2011 2013 2015 2017

Data: Fund for Peace.

Circles represent individual events of violence with at least one casualty. Circle size depicts the number of casualties and circle colour corresponds to the year of the event. More recent events may overlay older ones.

BELARUS

Transnistria

UKRAINE

Donetsk & Luhansk

MOLDOVA

Crimea

Abkhazia

South Ossetia

GEORGIA

Nagorno-Karabakh

ARMENIA

AZERBAIJAN

BLACK SEA

CASPIAN SEA

number of casualties: 400 300 200 100

year: 2016 2007

Russian troop presence
thousands

Belarus	Azerbaijan	Moldova	Armenia	Georgia	Ukraine
0	0	1.5	3.3	7	34

Data: UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset, IISS Military Balance 2017, SIPRI Multilateral Peace Operations Database, EEAS.
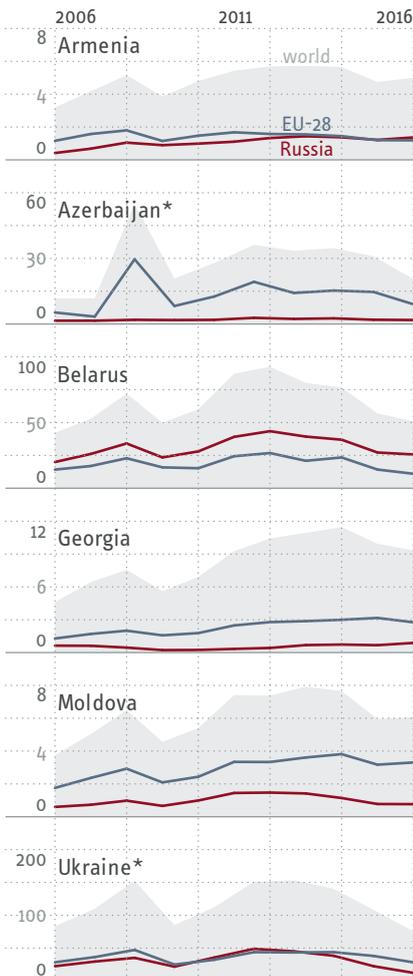
Economies

In terms of trade, the EU is a much more important partner for the region than Russia. The Union has Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) with Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, whereas Belarus and Armenia are part of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

	Visa Liberalisation	Association Agreement	Eurasian Union

	2015	2016	2017
Armenia	●		
Azerbaijan	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1991)		
Belarus	●		
Georgia		●	○
Moldova	○	●	
Ukraine	●		○

It is only Belarus which is highly dependent on trade with Russia. For Armenia, the picture is more mixed: while Russia is a bigger trading partner overall, Armenia actually exports more to the EU than to Russia.
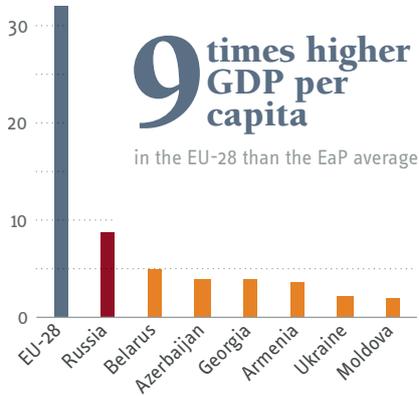
Trade volume
$ billion

Data: UN Comtrade.
*missing data

People

In 2016, the EU's GDP per capita was over nine times higher than the average in Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, whereas Russia's was only just over two times as high.

GDP per capita
$ thousands, 2016

9 times higher GDP per capita
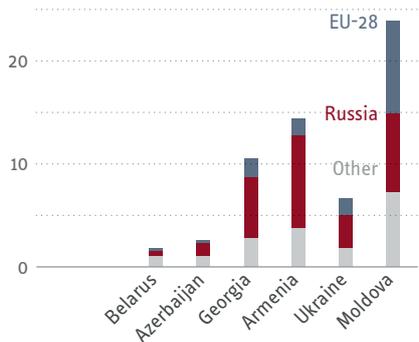
in the EU-28 than the EaP average

Data: World Bank.

However, six million people from EaP countries lived as migrants in Russia – three times as many as the number in EU member states. Diaspora communities in both the EU and Russia represent a significant source of income for EaP countries through remittances.

Remittances by sending country
% of GDP, 2015

Data: World Bank.

Remittance payments to Moldova from the EU-28 are equal to
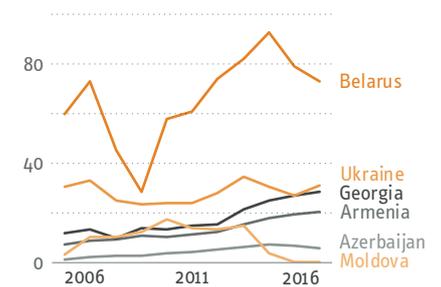
9 % of Moldovan GDP

Remittance payments to Armenia from Russia are equal to

9 % of Armenian GDP

Since 2014, Moldovans have been eligible for visa-free travel to the EU, and the scheme was rolled out to Georgians and Ukrainians in 2017. Citizens of Belarus (and Ukraine until 2016) have consistently ranked among the top 10 EU Schengen visa applicants since 2011. The EU also remains an attractive region in terms of higher education: in 2014, for instance, 59% of non-EU Erasmus+ participants came from the EaP region.

Schengen visa applications
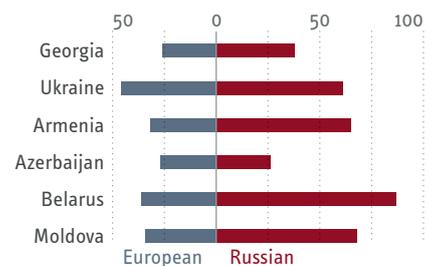*per 1,000 people*

Data: European Commission DG HOME, Council of the European Union.

Views

Even though negative opinions of the EU spiked in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, 77% of citizens in EaP countries held a positive or neutral view of the EU in 2016. In 2014, 60% of respondents in the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) East countries felt close to Russian culture, while 40% considered themselves to be close to European culture. Age plays an important role, as younger respondents felt less affinity to Russia (52%) than their older counterparts (66%).

Perceived closeness to cultures
% of respondents

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