

Eastern Partnership: between linkages with the EU and Russia

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Abstract

This work analyses the relationship between the European Union and the Eastern Partnership countries which includes Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. We propose to move beyond the center-periphery and external governance models which presume the hierarchical, power-based relations. The specific conditions of the region require us also consider Russia's role in the region as well as local factors of the Eastern Partnership countries which can challenge EU integration. The theory of linkage and leverage is used to analyze the complex interactions between the EU, Eastern Partnership countries, and Russia. The Eastern Partnership Index demonstrates that Eastern Partnership countries have rather intensive linkages with the EU, especially Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The resource revenues allow Azerbaijan to be less dependent on both Russia and the EU, but its trade relations are closer to the EU. While Belarus and Armenia have more intensive linkages with Russia and Russia's leverage for these two states is more powerful.

Keywords: EU, Eastern Partnership, linkage, and leverage, EU neighborhood

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a relação entre a União Europeia e os países da Parceria Oriental, que inclui Azerbaijão, Arménia, Geórgia, Bielorrússia, Moldávia e Ucrânia. Propomos ir além da abordagem do centro-periferia e dos modelos de governança externa que pressupõem as relações hierárquicas e de poder. As condições específicas da região exigem que consideremos também o papel da Rússia na região, bem como os fatores locais dos países da Parceria Oriental que podem desafiar a integração na UE. A teoria de ligação e alavancagem é usada para analisar as complexas interações entre a UE, os países da Parceria Oriental e a Rússia. O Índice da Parceria Oriental demonstra que os países da Parceria Oriental têm ligações bastante intensas com a UE, especialmente a Ucrânia, a Moldávia e a Geórgia. As receitas dos recursos naturais permitem que o Azerbaijão seja menos dependente da Rússia e da UE, mas as suas relações comerciais

estão mais próximas da UE. Embora a Bielorrússia e a Arménia tenham vínculos mais intensos com a Rússia, a influência da Rússia nesses dois Estados é mais poderosa.

Palavras-chave: UE, Parceria Oriental, ligação e influência, vizinhança da UE

Introduction

After the Big Eastern enlargement in 2004 EU integration has changed its nature. EU builds partnerships with its border regions, integrates them in the EU market, and tries to share democracy, good governance, and its values. However, it is a new type of integration - the integration beyond conditionality¹ when the well working in the Eastern Enlargement case reform incentive scheme does not fit well to countries that lack membership perspective and are included in the sphere of Russia's influence too.

After the Eastern Enlargement, a new project - European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) was launched, which was the first attempt of the EU to provide neighboring states a different type of cooperation than the membership in the EU. ENP implies the design of an Action Plan regularly monitored by the EU for each participating country². ENP also has several priority sectors for collaboration as security, governance, economic and social development, migration and mobility, job creation, energy, and climate change (The European Neighbourhood Policy). ENP includes a wide range of the countries in the South and East borders of the EU which are heterogeneous and are on different steps of the EU integration. Thus, we are going to focus only on the Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy which was formulated as a separate part of the ENP in 2009 after the summit in Prague and includes Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. The EaP presumes cooperation in the same fields as ENP and is an important instrument for these countries to deepen integration with the EU.

In this paper, we argue that this new type of integration also requires a new theoretical framework for the analysis. The traditional center-periphery model and external governance model are hierarchical, based on the power and structure frameworks that do not presume that integration can be more flexible and changeable. We propose to apply the theory of linkage and leverage developed by Levitsky and Way to the EaP case since this theory presumes that role of both external and local actors

1 LAVENEX, Sandra - "A governance perspective on the European neighbourhood policy: integration beyond conditionality?".

2 GÄNZLE, Stefan - "Externalizing EU governance and the European neighbourhood policy: towards a framework for analysis", p.7.

matters and there can be several external actors in the region. This theory allows us to consider the complex relations between the EU, Russia, and EaP countries. The paper is structured as follows: the first part describes the traditional approaches on EU relations with the other countries focusing specifically on the EaP case; the second part presents the theory of linkage and leverage and cases' analysis.

Traditional approaches to EU relations with EaP countries

EU interests in the cooperation with third countries are usually connected with the border security and simplification of economic relations³. It is considered that the main goal of the ENP, as well as EaP, is to provide security to the EU citizens on the borders (from terrorism and migration), reinforce the borders rather than integrate states to the EU⁴. According to Dimitrova, this feature of the borders to present mistrust of insiders towards outsiders illustrates the state-centric paradigm of the borders which are seen essential for state sovereignty, power, and hierarchy. However, the security and mistrust issues are more connected with the Southern partners from where flows of the migrants are coming. In this sense, the EaP area is more secure for the EU. The EaP countries are rather treated through periphery, imperial, colonial frontier geostrategy and external governance frameworks which emphasize the desire of the EU to change the neighborhood and to keep it as a buffer zone.

Thus, one of the most widely applied models is a center-periphery model where the EU is modeled as the center and EaP region as a periphery. According to Bosse, this model presumes the spatial and social construction of the region where the center expands its power to the periphery⁵. The EaP region is particularly seen as a periphery, argues Bosse, because Russia is excluded from this partnership, and the region is often called a "common neighborhood" of two big actors as EU and Russia. Furthermore, based on Wallerstein's neo-Marxist concept the EaP can be called semi-periphery or a buffer zone⁶. Marchetti and co-authors argue that this policy has quite a hybrid nature and its documents reveal the clear distinction between insiders (EU members) and outsiders (EU neighbors)⁷. However, as the authors notes

3 BUSYGINA, Irina - *Russia–EU relations and the common neighborhood: Coercion vs. authority*, p.64.

4 DIMITROVOVA, Bohdana – "Remaking Europe's Borders through the European Neighbourhood Policy", p.9.

5 BOSSE, Giselle - "The Eastern Partnership and the disintegration of Eastern Europe: The end of the region-building project?", p.99.

6 SCHUMACHER, Tobias; MARCHETTI, Andreas; DEMMELHUBER, Thomas – "The Routledge Handbook on the European Neighbourhood Policy Routledge. The European Neighbourhood Policy", p.132.

7 *Idem*, p.134.

the semi-periphery model presumes that the EaP countries are more developed and committed to the EU norms than their Southern neighbors.

The EaP integration also matters in the EU bordering. Browning and Joenniemi outline models of the European geopolitics and several EU borders geostrategies. As such, there are three models of the European geopolitics: Westphalian, Imperial, and Neomedieval. The Westphalian model presumes that the power from the center is blurred to the borders and the EU is portrayed as a unified actor with its border regime, currency, and security policy⁸. In the Imperial model, the power is distributed from the center to the borders with different degrees. The Neomedieval model presumes that the power is no longer located in one center in Brussel, but it is regionalized through different networks⁹. Browning and Joenniemi also refer to Walter's distinction of the borders geostrategies which helps them to construct a theoretical explanation. Thus, there is the network geostrategy which presumes that the role of the borders is declining, and the free movement of goods, people, and services should be implemented. The other geostrategy is called march which refers to the creation of the security buffer zone. One more strategy is the colonial frontier meaning that the area beyond a frontier should be transformed according to the desire of the inside¹⁰. Moreover, the last strategy is limes which differs from the colonial frontier in the sense that there should be a limit of the transformation of the outside. According to the authors, in the ENP case, the EU applies the imperial vision while geostrategies are mixed and should be analyzed in detail. The desire of the EU to create from the ENP a buffer zone coincides with the march and limes geostrategies¹¹. Moreover, the EU tries to outline the "ring of friends" where friends are perceived as foreigners in the "hierarchy of otherness"¹². However, as Browning and Joenniemi note, the EU also has the vision to transform the ENP, spread its norms and institutions which coincides with the colonial frontier geostrategy. This strategy presumes that ENP should adopt to insider's behavior and only after meeting all the conditions outsiders can become "friends" as authors note. Furthermore, it is also important to distinguish between the Eastern and South regions of the ENP. As such, the EaP is closer to the EU in geographic, institutional, and values sense and is not seen as a threatening region rather it can become an insider¹³. Thus, as Browning and Joenniemi emphasize, the colonial frontier geostrategy that presumes the transformation of the outside in line with the inside makes more sense for the

8 BROWNING, Christopher S.; JOENNIEMI, Pertti - "Geostrategies of the European neighbourhood policy", p.522.

9 *Idem*, p. 525.

10 *Idem*, p.529.

11 *Idem*, p.532.

12 *Idem*, *Ibidem*.

13 *Idem*, p.537.

EaP countries. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that in the cooperation with “outsiders” EU always faces a security-stabilization dilemma – a trade-off between the transformation of the region and maintenance of the undemocratic stability. It also should be noted that the colonial frontier geostrategy has a close meaning to the external governance theory which is the most often applied in the studies of the EU relations with other countries and which also presumes hierarchy and non-inclusion.

External governance can be defined as “a transfer of the rules and EU norms to non-EU countries”, that is, how effectively the EU transfers its rules and regulations and how they are adopted by third countries¹⁴. As Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier note, the approach is characterized by asymmetric relations, a hierarchy of communication structures, and a high level of bureaucratization¹⁵. According to Lavenex and Schimmelfennig¹⁶, hierarchical governance is implemented mainly through legislation, strict adoption of the *acquis*, and regular monitoring of its implementation. This framework also presumes the conditionality approach when the EU encourages or punishes third states for progress or rollback from the democratic course. Conditionality is a power relationship between the EU and its neighbors, based on “common goods” offered by the EU as a free market, common currency, and freedom of movement¹⁷.

Last but not least, Korosteleva argues that the EaP (as ENP) policy itself is designed in a special way to cover with the notion of “partnership” the actual distinction between “self” and “other”¹⁸. According to her, a partnership is just used as an alternative to the membership for the EaP countries. In this case, there are not “shared values” for both the EU and EaP area and they are not equal partners, rather outsiders should act as “norm-takers” from the EU¹⁹. Thus, not even it is hard to call the EU and EaP equal partners in terms of the size of their economies and political role on the international arena, it is also hard to call them partners because only one actor should adopt western values and institutions. In the absence of the presumed partnership, as Korosteleva outlines, the traditional external governance approach is applied.

Overall, the relations between EU and its neighbors including EaP countries are usually analyzed through the center-periphery, external governance, imperial frameworks that presume the strict hierarchy, relations of power, and dominance of

14 BOSSE, Giselle – “The EU’s relations with Moldova: governance, partnership, or ignorance?”, p.1292.

15 SCHIMMELFENNIG, Frank; SEDELMEIER, Ulrich – “Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe”, p.669.

16 LAVENEX, Sandra; SCHIMMELFENNIG, Frank - “EU rules beyond EU borders: theorizing external governance in European politics”.

17 BUSYGINA, Irina - *Russia–EU relations and the common neighborhood: Coercion vs. Authority*, p.62.

18 KOROSTELEVA, Elena A., “Change or continuity: Is the Eastern Partnership an adequate tool for the European neighbourhood?”.

19 *Idem*, p.246.

the external actor. In this paper we propose to go beyond these models and think about EU-EaP relations are interconnected, shaped by many linkages where all of the involved actors play a role.

Beyond the center-periphery model to the linkage and leverage

From the theoretical point of view, the widely used theory of the external governance and conditionality approach are a lot criticized. For example, conditionality is considered to be effective only if there is the prospect of membership in the EU²⁰. Membership perspective is a kind of credible commitment when countries are ready to hold transformations for future membership. At the same time, Association Agreements (AA) used for the EaP countries are not such a powerful tool²¹. Concerning this issue, other theoretical frameworks should be applied in the EaP case.

In this paper, we propose to apply the theory of linkage and leverage developed by Levitsky and Way to the EaP case. The theory presumes that are different economic, political, social, organizational, and cross-border ties between a country and EU or the USA which can be used by the international actor to influence the democratization of this country (Levitsky, Way 2006, 379)²². The geographic location of a country matters a lot since international actors tend to build more linkages with the neighbors. Having many linkages with the West enables governments to be accountable for their actions. Levitsky and Way argue that Western partners immediately will take attention if governments roll back from the democratic course. Thus, having intense linkages it became risky for governments to violate the Western-sponsored course. Moreover, in this case Western actors can interfere in the internal situation gaining the support of NGOs²³. Moreover, small and dependent on international donor countries are more vulnerable to the pressure from outside than those countries with the rich resources²⁴. However, linkages and leverage with the US or EU can be undermined by the other regional actor which also invests resources in a country²⁵.

In the case of EaP countries, such an actor is definitely Russia. EaP states are also post-Soviet states with Russian minorities living there. Russia actively appeals to the shared history and language issue in its policy towards these states. EaP states are

20 BÖRZEL, Tanja A.; SCHIMMELFENNIG, Frank – “Coming together or drifting apart? The EU’s political integration capacity in Eastern Europe”.

21 *Idem*, p.279.

22 LEVITSKY, Steven; WAY, Lucan A. - “Linkage versus leverage. Rethinking the international dimension of regime change”, p.379.

23 *Idem*, p.384.

24 *Idem*, p.382-383.

25 *Idem*, p.383.

members of the patronized by Russia regional organizations as Commonwealth of Independent States, Eurasian Economic Union, and Customs Union. Contrasting to the EU, Russia would like to hold the loyal authoritarian leaders in power and its influence is not aimed to democratize or improve the governance in EaP countries (Ambrosio 2016)²⁶.

Thus, having actually two unbalanced centers in the EaP the center-periphery model is hardly applicable. These centers are not symmetric since some of the EaP countries have closer or weaker ties with one of them which is demonstrated in the case study part. Rather the relations between EU, Russia, and EaP countries are very interlinked and linkages with one actor can be used against the other. Moreover, the EaP countries themselves can shape the configuration of linkages. Local governments can use the interlinked resources offered by the EU and Russia to push their own interests²⁷. The local conditions of these countries are also crucially important since they are deriving points for the certain EU and Russia's strategies in the region.

From the practical point of view, several important steps illustrate the close linkages between the EU and EaP as well as Russia and EaP.

First, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia have AA with the EU since 2014 which presume "enhanced political association, increased political dialogue and deeper cooperation on justice and security issues with the EU" (The European Council)²⁸. Moreover, as part of the AA, these three countries entered a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) which is aimed to reduce trade barriers and improve trade relations. Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia also have been granted a visa liberalization regime to the EU which made it is easier to travel to the EU for the citizens of these countries. The last fact also shows that the EU does not treat the Eastern partners the same as the Southern which are mostly seen as non-secure regions from where immigrants arrive. Furthermore, there is also the Eastern Partnership Index which is designed to measure the integration of the EaP through the density of the linkages between the EU and the EaP. According to its data, Ukraine on average for 2018 has 0.66 out of 1 linkage with the EU, Georgia has 0.71, Moldova 0.71, Armenia 0.5, Belarus 0.45, and Azerbaijan 0.47²⁹. Trade integration is very dense because the EU is the main trading partner for Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and the second-largest partner for Belarus and Armenia³⁰. Moreover, there is high mobility,

26 AMBROSIO, Thomas - *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian resistance to democratization in the former Soviet Union*.

27 DELCOUR, Laure - "'You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink': the EU's and Russia's intersecting conditionalities and domestic responses in Georgia and Moldova", p.490.

28 EUROPEAN COUNCIL. n.d. Eastern Partnership. Accessed February 23, 2020. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/>.

29 LOVITT, Jeff (ed.) - "Eastern Partnership Index 2015-2016: Charting Progress in European Integration, Democratic Reforms, and Sustainable Development".

30 *Idem, Ibidem*.

including academics and students between the EaP and EU especially for Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia which have 1, Armenia which got 0.75 and less for Belarus 0.63 and Azerbaijan 0.5³¹.

In contrast, membership in CIS, Eurasian Economic Union, and Custom Union does not intensify linkages between Russia and EaP so deeply as with the EU. Rather there is a high dependency on Russian gas in all EaP countries except Azerbaijan, economic relations, and cultural linkages (history and Russian-speaking minorities)³². Russia often uses the energy leverage to push on EaP countries since it is the main exporter of gas for these states.

Thus, based on linkage and leverage theory which allows considering different actors and interlinked relations between them we propose to study each of the cases - Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Armenia closely.

Georgia

Georgia, together with Moldova and Ukraine, entered into an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, as well as the agreement on Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Zones in 2016 (European Commission)³³. In 2017, Georgian citizens were also granted visa-free entry to the EU (European Commission)³⁴. According to EaP Index, Georgia is also a leader in linkage dimension (0.71/1)³⁵.

Nevertheless, Georgia is faced with many challenges to complete all AA conditions. One of them is an extremely polarized society and the polarization of elites. For example, the ruling party, the Georgian Dream Party - Democratic Georgia, founded by businessman B. Ivanishvili, experienced serious resistance from the president and part of civil society when changing the constitution and moving to the parliamentary system³⁶. Moreover, the opposition, the media, and society are extremely polarized. There are anti-Western and xenophobic moods in the country that advocate the preservation of Georgian identity and fear its destruction during Western integration³⁷. As for the country's ties with Russia, they are of a dual nature. On the one hand,

31 *Idem, Ibidem.*

32 CAMERON, David R.; ORENSTEIN, Mitchell A. - "Post-Soviet Authoritarianism: The Influence of Russia in Its» Near Abroad», p.6.

33 EUROPEAN COMMISSION. n. d. "Georgia. EU-Georgia Relations". Accessed October 15, 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/georgia_en.

34 *Idem, Ibidem.*

35 LOVITT, Jeff (ed.) - "Eastern Partnership Index 2015-2016: Charting Progress in European Integration, Democratic Reforms, and Sustainable Development", p.22.

36 *Idem, p.62.*

37 *Idem, Ibidem.*

after the 2008 war and the occupation of the territory of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, relations with Russia sharply worsened and most Georgians see Russia as an aggressor country and the main threat to state's security³⁸. This frozen conflict and the ethnolinguistic polarization of society create obstacles to reform. On the other hand, Georgia, being a resource-poor country, continues to be very dependent on Russian oil and gas, and the export of its goods to Russia. After the Georgian Dream Party came to power, in 2012 Russia lifted the trade embargo that has been in force since 2006, investments from Russia poured into Georgia and tourism has been growing. As for GDP growth indicators, GDP per capita almost doubled in Georgia between 2009-2018, seeing a decline only in 2014, after which it continued to grow again³⁹. According to the World Bank, no other EaP country has achieved such economic growth since the EaP was launched. However, Georgia continues to belong to the group of countries with incomes below the average⁴⁰, which makes it a rather poor country dependent on energy and economic linkages with Russia. Russia can use its leverage to pressure Georgia to stop democratic, pro-Western movements.

Moldova

From the signing of the Eastern Partnership initiative until 2017, Moldova has been named the leader in reform and cooperation with the EU having 0.71 on linkage dimension⁴¹. However, the country has lagged behind due to the constitutional crisis of 2009-2016, which affected the efficiency of the government and which was resolved through direct presidential elections and the victory of the pro-Russian candidate I. Dodon⁴². Direct presidential elections were held, although Moldova is a state with a parliamentary system and indirect presidential elections since 2000⁴³. According to Way, Moldova is the most democratic country from the

38 JAM NEWS - "The survey reveals the Georgians view of Russia as the biggest threat", 2018. Accessed November 25, 2019. <https://jam-news.net/survey-reveals-georgians-view-russia-as-biggest-threat/>.

39 WORLD BANK – "GDP per capita (current US\$), 1960-2017", 2017. Accessed November 30, 2019. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ny.gdp.pc.ap.cd>.

40 WORLD BANK - "Country and Lending Groups", 2020. Accessed November 25, 2019. <http://data.worldbank.org/about/country-and-lending-groups>.

41 LOVITT, Jeff (ed.) - "Eastern Partnership Index 2015-2016: Charting Progress in European Integration, Democratic Reforms, and Sustainable Development". *Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum*, 2017. Accessed November 25, 2019. http://www.eap-index.eu/sites/default/files/EaP_Index_2015-16_0.pdf.

42 GÄNZLE, Stefan – "Externalizing EU governance and the European neighbourhood policy: towards a framework for analysis". In a presentation at the *Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association*. UBC, Vancouver on. Geohistory. 2018. Moldovan Politics: Presidential Crises 2009-2018 (2008). Accessed February 10, 2020. <https://geohistory.today/moldovan-presidential-crises/>.

43 ROPER, Steven D. – "From semi-presidentialism to parliamentarism: Regime change and presidential power in Moldova", p.120.

CIS. Way believes that Moldova is characterized by “pluralism by default” when there is not so much democracy in the country as pluralism of opinions and rivalry of elites. The fact is that society in the country is historically bipolar, ethnically, and nationally divided into pro-Russian and more pro-Romanian⁴⁴. This division led in the 90s to the war on the Nester river, when the territory of Transnistria declared independence and is now under the patronage of Russia, being a frozen conflict. Furthermore, ethnolinguistic separation creates the basis for geopolitical separation, expressed in conflicting positions of support for European integration or membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. Thus, according to recent population surveys, 48% of the country’s citizens support the country’s entry into the Eurasian Economic Union (where it subsequently received observer status), and 40% of EU membership (Moldova.org). Polarization also undoubtedly affects conflicts among elites. I. Dodon, being a popular pro-Russian politician, with virtually no authority in the parliamentary system of Moldova, was several times temporarily removed from power by the decisions of the Constitutional Court after he again refused to sign decrees on ministers elected by parliament⁴⁵. He also called for a referendum on the dissolution of parliament and the expansion of presidents’ rights⁴⁶. The president is trying in every possible way to improve Moldova’s relations with Russia, regularly making visits to Russia and strengthening the country’s dependence on this external actor. He has already achieved observer status for Moldova in the Eurasian Economic Union and is working hard to resume trade relations between countries that have worsened after Russia imposed a trade embargo.

Belarus

Least of all controlling corruption and the rule of law, Belarus is the most politically stable state of the Eastern Partnership⁴⁷. Belarus is an authoritarian state and is often called “the last dictatorship in Europe” in the literature⁴⁸. Since 1994, the country has been ruled by authoritarian leader A. Lukashenko. Way believes that

44 WAY, Lucan - *Pluralism by default: Weak autocrats and the rise of competitive politics*.

45 LOVITT, Jeff (ed.) - “Eastern Partnership Index 2015-2016: Charting Progress in European Integration, Democratic Reforms, and Sustainable Development”. Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2017. Accessed November 25, 2019. http://www.eap-index.eu/sites/default/files/EaP_Index_2015-16_0.pdf, p.42-43.

46 *Idem, Ibidem*.

47 WORLD BANK - “Worldwide Governance Indicators, 1996–2014”, 2016. Accessed February 10, 2020. <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home>.

48 BOSSE, Giselle; KOROSTELEVA-POLGLASE, Elena - “Changing Belarus? The limits of EU governance in Eastern Europe and the promise of partnership”. *Cooperation and conflict*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836709102736>. 44(2) (2009) 143-165., p.144.

he managed to create such a stable authoritarian regime due to a number of local factors specific to the country. Unlike Moldova and Ukraine, Belarus is not such a heterogeneous ethnically state⁴⁹. The country is dominated by Russian national identity and most Belarusians know both Belarusian and Russian⁵⁰. This factor facilitates not only governance. Moreover, Lukashenko was able to consolidate the regime, manage the centralized control over the economy, which helped him to prevent the emergence of influential and wealthy oligarchs who could resist him⁵¹. The external factor of Russian influence also plays an important role in maintaining the country's undemocratic regime. Korosteleva with a co-author believes that relations with Russia have always been a priority for Belarus than a partnership with the EU. Geopolitical borders were shifted towards the West only when Belarus needed to get something from Russia⁵². The fact is that Belarus receives Russian gas at the lowest price and then resells it on the world market⁵³. High resource revenues not only make Belarus the most dependent on Russia but also allow Lukashenko to buy elites' loyalty, ensure economic growth in the country, and stability while controlling the economy, media, and preventing democratization. In this case, perhaps the Russian influence and oil revenues, as well as the undemocratic regime, represent the most serious obstacle to the EU's influence on Belarus. Linkages with the EU are quite low for Belarus – only 0.45/1⁵⁴.

Ukraine

The crisis of 2014, the war in the Donbas, and the annexation of Crimea seriously affected Ukraine's political stability. These events also weakened relations between Ukraine and Russia, leading to sanctions on both sides, Russia's non-recognition of new political power in Ukraine and active negative rhetoric against each other in the media. Being an important territory on the way of Russian gas to Europe, Ukraine also significantly reduced its dependence on gas from Russia, trying to reorient to the European energy market⁵⁵. Weakened linkages with Russia

49 WAY, Lucan - *Pluralism by default: Weak autocrats and the rise of competitive politics*.

50 *Idem, Ibidem*.

51 *Idem, Ibidem*.

52 BOSSE, Giselle; KOROSTELEVA-POLGLASE, Elena - "Changing Belarus? The limits of EU governance in Eastern Europe and the promise of partnership", p.155.

53 WAY, Lucan - *Pluralism by default: Weak autocrats and the rise of competitive politics*.

54 LOVITT, Jeff (ed.) - "Eastern Partnership Index 2015-2016: Charting Progress in European Integration, Democratic Reforms, and Sustainable Development", p.22.

55 WOLCZUK, Kataryna – "Managing the flows of gas and rules: Ukraine between the EU and Russia", p.130.

strengthened Ukraine's dependence on the EU. Having an AA with the EU, Ukraine today receives the biggest material support from the EU, support groups for the country are created (European Commission)⁵⁶, and Ukraine has become a leader in implementing EU norms and standards⁵⁷. As in the case of Georgia, in 2017, citizens of Ukraine were granted visa-free entry to the Schengen zone; economic integration with the EU was strengthened; trade turnover between Ukraine and the Union was growing⁵⁸. Despite the rapprochement with the EU, Ukraine remains a poorly governed country, and the reasons for this lie not only in the situation in the Donbas. Way notes that Ukraine is a very ethnically polarized country. The western part of the country was historically closer in Europe, it was Western Ukrainians who for the most part participated in the Maidan when President Yanukovich wanted to postpone the signing of the long-planned Association Agreement with the EU⁵⁹. The eastern part is populated by the Russian-speaking population, who feel their unity with Russia. Influential clans of Donetsk brought to power Yanukovich⁶⁰. This heterogeneity is used for political purposes, to mobilize the population in support of a particular candidate or political course⁶¹. Way writes that although this polarization had an impact on the development of pluralism in Ukraine and prevented the emergence of a consolidated authoritarian regime, it also negatively affects the weakness of state's potential and parties, facilitates the prosperity of corruption, which affects the poor quality of governance. Thus, due to the many critical junctures of 2014-2015 Ukraine now actively intensifies linkages with the EU but also preserving energy, economic and cultural linkages with Russia.

Armenia

This state of the Caucasus region is ahead of other EaP countries except for Georgia, in terms of state accountability⁶². Unlike Moldova and Ukraine, Armenia is not ethnically polarized, and a single national identity is a powerful tool for mobilization⁶³. The unity of the Armenians can be explained by many historical problems,

56 EUROPEAN COMMISSION. n. d. Ukraine. Accessed February 10, 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/countries/ukraine_en.

57 LOVITT, Jeff (ed.) - "Eastern Partnership Index 2015-2016: Charting Progress in European Integration, Democratic Reforms, and Sustainable Development", p.18.

58 *Idem*, p.36.

59 WAY, Lucan - *Pluralism by default: Weak autocrats and the rise of competitive politics*.

60 *Idem*, *Ibidem*.

61 *Idem*, *Ibidem*.

62 WORLD BANK - "Worldwide Governance Indicators, 1996–2014", 2016. Accessed February 10, 2020. <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#home>.

63 WAY, Lucan - *Pluralism by default: Weak autocrats and the rise of competitive politics*.

in particular, as Way notes, the presence of the frozen Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and neighboring Azerbaijan. However, conflicts among elites and clans who do not want to carry out many transformations are also an obstacle in relation to the EU. However, in connection with the events of the Velvet Revolution, there is a possibility of democratization and reform⁶⁴. It is worth noting that, unlike Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, Armenia did not sign an AA with the EU. Russia insisted on canceling the signing of this agreement, granting Armenia membership in the Customs Union⁶⁵. In general, linkages between Armenia and Russia are stronger than those of Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, and Russia remains one of the main trade partners of Armenia⁶⁶.

Azerbaijan

The regime in the country is a consolidated authoritarianism, with the lowest, after Belarus, indicators of democracy, freedom of the media, and independence of the courts from all countries of the EaP⁶⁷. However, the country has the highest economic growth and economic development in general which makes it least dependent on the external actors⁶⁸. The fact is that, unlike all the cases we have studied, Azerbaijan is a resource-rich country and the least dependent on Russian gas supplies. The state is not a member of any union patronized by Russia, and relations with Russia are built only through bilateral agreements. Azerbaijan's main trading partner is the EU, where Azerbaijan also exports its gas⁶⁹. Last but not least, president Aliyev who came to power in the 1990s, managed to consolidate the regime into an authoritarian direction, putting key members of his family on key posts⁷⁰. The authoritarian nature of the regime as well as resource revenues make the country less vulnerable to both EU and Russia leverages. Azerbaijan has only 0.47/1 linkages with the EU mainly in trade and citizens mobility⁷¹.

64 LOVITT, Jeff (ed.) - "Eastern Partnership Index 2015-2016: Charting Progress in European Integration, Democratic Reforms, and Sustainable Development", p.70.

65 BÖRZEL, Tanja A.; LEBANIDZE, Bidzina - "The transformative power of Europe" beyond enlargement: the EU's performance in promoting democracy in its neighbourhood", p.30.

66 CAMERON, David R.; ORENSTEIN, Mitchell A. - "Post-Soviet Authoritarianism: The Influence of Russia in Its» Near Abroad», p.28.

67 LOVITT, Jeff (ed.) - "Eastern Partnership Index 2015-2016: Charting Progress in European Integration, Democratic Reforms, and Sustainable Development", p.83.

68 *Idem*, p.88.

69 *Idem*, p.86.

70 WAY, Lucan - *Pluralism by default: Weak autocrats and the rise of competitive politics*.

71 LOVITT, Jeff (ed.) - "Eastern Partnership Index 2015-2016: Charting Progress in European Integration, Democratic Reforms, and Sustainable Development", p.22-23.

Conclusion

In this paper we presented that relation between EU and its neighbors is frequently analyzed through the center-periphery model and its deviations as external governance and imperial frameworks. All these models presume that the external actor as the EU is in the position of power, it sets rules of the game and pressure on the periphery. We have not a goal to challenge the power relations since they take place due to the institutional and legal constraints of EU integration. However, on the example of the Eastern Partnership countries, we demonstrated that other theoretical frameworks can be applied to study relations between the EU and its neighbors. The theory of linkage and leverage allows us to consider all the complex relations between actors leaving space for the local factors of the EaP countries. Moreover, it is especially useful in regions where more than one center exists. In the EaP case, linkages between these countries and the EU as well as with Russia can overlap creating complex interactions. Thus, this theory can be applied to further research EU integration.

Regards to the cases, the EaP Index demonstrates that the EaP countries have intensive linkages with the EU, especially Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. However, the way to democratization and reforms presumed by the Association Agreements is challenged by the local factors of the countries and linkages with Russia. All the EaP countries except Azerbaijan and partially Ukraine are very dependent on Russian gas which is a powerful pressure instrument of Russian foreign policy. Moreover, economic ties with Russia are very dense in the case of Armenia and Belarus while cultural ties between Russian speaking minorities and Russia are most sensitive in Moldova and partially in Ukraine. The oil revenues in Azerbaijan make the country less vulnerable to external pressure. Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are mainly interested in economic ties with the EU while Belarus and Armenia have more intensive economic linkages with Russia.

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