

# **THE YOUNG AND THE RESTLESS: EUROPE, RUSSIA, AND THE NEXT GENERATION OF DIPLOMATS IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP**

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## **SUMMARY**

- Young diplomats in Eastern Partnership countries are optimistic and pro-European. Many of them want the EU to become a bolder geopolitical actor.
- They often criticise their countries' leaderships and prefer to trust institutions rather than individuals.
- Most young diplomats tend to link success in foreign policy with domestic reforms.
- Russia is losing support among them, but it maintains a significant presence on the ground in their countries.
- Young diplomats see China as an attractive economic player but a controversial political partner.
- They would like to maintain good relations with the US, but the confrontation between Washington and Moscow forces some Eastern Partnership countries to take the Russian side.

# Introduction

Western governments often refer to the six countries in the European Union's Eastern Partnership as the 'states in-between' or the 'post-Soviet space'. But these countries are home to a generation of young diplomats and other foreign policy practitioners who do not remember the Soviet times, were mostly born in independent countries or soon before independence, and operate in an increasingly fragmented geopolitical landscape.

The Eastern Partnership may place all six nations in one basket, but there are significant differences between them – and they have used their time since independence in contrasting ways. Belarus has little in common with Georgia; Azerbaijan and Armenia have little to do with either. Ukraine would love to sprint ahead of the region and to never be called 'post-Soviet' again. Moldova is trying to find a balance between east and west. If there is a sense of common purpose between Eastern Partnership countries, it is among the members of the newly founded Association Trio: Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

This paper explores the attitudes of young foreign policy practitioners in Eastern Partnership states, focusing on the nature of their work, what drives them, how idealistic or pragmatic they are, and their perceptions of their countries' approaches to foreign policy. The paper analyses the geopolitical orientation of these elites and how their worldviews could eventually change the region.

The authors conducted their research for the paper at a time of significant change in the region. The last two years have seen escalating regime brutality in Belarus; a major flare-up in the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Azerbaijan and Armenia; large-scale Russian military manoeuvres on Ukraine's border; a new political crisis in Georgia after the detention of an opposition leader; and Maia Sandu's victory in the Moldovan presidential election – to mention just a few significant developments, all of which have been overshadowed by the covid-19 pandemic.

This paper builds on Kadri Liik's work for her 2019 paper for ECFR 'The last of the offended: Russia's first post-Putin diplomats', which provided insights into the views of a new generation of young diplomats in Russia. She found that the West is no longer central to Russian foreign policy, that young Russian diplomats are disillusioned with the West, and that their outlook is sharply realist and pragmatic. While it remains to be seen whether Russia's civilian ministries have the power to shape foreign policy, the difference between older and younger generations is profound.

This paper is based on 118 interviews with people between the ages of 20 and 45 who are either diplomats, foreign policy practitioners, students aspiring to diplomatic careers, or people who work

with them and know them well. The authors conducted some of the interviews with the help of a network of researchers in the six Eastern Partnership countries – and with professional institutes that organised six focus groups in four of these states. (The exceptions were Belarus and Azerbaijan, due to security threats that people may face for participating in independent research, and the difficulty of cooperating with state-owned institutes there.) Belarus may have suspended its participation in the Eastern Partnership programme, but the authors believe it is important to include Belarusian voices in the paper.

The paper shows that, for young diplomats in the region, there is no real east-west dilemma. Most of them do not see Russia as the ally of choice, are generally pro-European, and – if given the chance – would like their countries to make progress towards European integration. They regard China as a rising power but mostly have a cautious attitude towards it. The United States and NATO are seen as guarantors of national security and territorial integrity by young diplomats in Georgia and Ukraine, but are viewed more sceptically by those in Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

Although most young diplomats see the EU in a positive light, they have growing concerns about the coherence and effectiveness of European policy in their region. In Association Trio countries, young diplomats want a clearer path towards EU and NATO integration; in other Eastern Partnership states, they expect the EU to provide stronger support for a democratic transition and efforts to build resilience against the security threat from Russia. All of them expect the EU to become more active in their countries and hope that the bloc can become a true geopolitical player.

## Young diplomats' backgrounds and views on diplomacy

Most young diplomats in Eastern Partnership countries come from middle-class families, and have pursued undergraduate studies in their home countries in fields such as international relations, law, and business. Many of them also have a post-graduate degree or training in a Western institution. They are generally more adept at foreign languages – except Russian – than their older counterparts are.

Naturally, the most Western-orientated young diplomats are from countries that have adopted a Western model of governance and a political project that aims to tighten relations with Europe and the US, particularly through alliances such as the EU and NATO. These aspirations are most apparent among young diplomats in Association Trio countries. When choosing their careers, many young diplomats did so to “support their country’s national interest and modernise the foreign service”, as one of them puts it.<sup>[1]</sup> However, they are generally more pragmatic and transactional than their senior colleagues – even if they still seek career opportunities that are financially rewarding.

The public sector in Eastern Partnership countries pays relatively low salaries and can be difficult to join due to obstacles such as political interference and unequal opportunities (especially in terms of gender equality). These obstacles also affect career development and the rotation of diplomats in foreign missions. However, reforms in public administration in the past decade have made foreign ministries’ recruitment processes much more meritocratic.

Young diplomats in Association Trio countries are free of the burden of nostalgia for the Soviet Union, and strongly support efforts to distance their governments from the Kremlin. Indeed, their enthusiasm for their work stems from their countries’ independence, which has brought about real opportunities for change. They seek to build a new national identity based largely on Europe’s governance model and values. In Georgia, young diplomats are strong advocates of democratic consolidation and EU integration. They often name their role models as being figures such as Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan, alongside Ilia Chavchavadze, who is revered in Georgia for having revived the national liberation movement in the nineteenth century.

Similarly, in Moldova and Ukraine, young diplomats’ enthusiasm about working for the future of their countries outweighs their disappointment with the political instability and dysfunctional institutions they are forced to contend with today. They consider themselves to be what one of them describes as “constructive patriots” who work for state institutions despite low salaries because they want to “build better countries and help their countries overcome challenges”.

Young diplomats are generally quite critical of national institutions, but also admit that these institutions have made progress since independence. In Ukraine, they have a high opinion of the new system of recruitment to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but have encountered career development difficulties within it. Some Ukrainian diplomats even oppose the appointment of young ambassadors – arguing that, when serving one’s country, experience and maturity is more important than education and knowledge. At the same time, many young diplomats across Eastern Partnership states are concerned about what they perceive as the poor diplomatic skills and lack of creativity of their older colleagues. However, one former high-ranking official in Ukraine’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs is

pessimistic both about the “professional qualifications of a new wave of Ukraine’s diplomats” and the future of Ukrainian diplomacy more broadly. “The best of the best go into business, where salaries and opportunities are much more attractive. The MFA has to deal with the best of the worst, unfortunately.”

In Moldova, young diplomats are mainly concerned about the lack of human resources capacity in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the country’s dysfunctional system of rotational diplomatic postings. They point out that political interference is more pronounced in appointments to high-level positions in the ministry. Moldova’s new image as a country in which women can hold the highest positions of power contrasts with that of other Eastern Partnership states, where there is a widespread concern that gender stereotypes make it difficult for women to attain prominent roles in national institutions.

Young diplomats in all Eastern Partnership countries believe that internal reforms and improvements to domestic policy can strengthen their country’s foreign policy. Security concerns are particularly prevalent among Georgians and Ukrainians – who believe that their countries need stronger security policies to combat Russia’s hybrid and cyber-warfare, and who want Washington to help protect their territorial integrity. Ukraine is something of a special case in this, given that young diplomats there openly supported both the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. One young Ukrainian diplomat viewed their position on this issue as a demonstration of their awareness and commitment to a democratic transition.

In Armenia, young diplomats are deeply concerned about the deterioration of the security situation following the country’s 2020 war with Azerbaijan, part of the long-running Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The violence has reinforced their sense of religion as a defining aspect of national identity. Indeed, young Armenian diplomats view Christianity as an “important belief” that reflects their country’s “traditional values and that provides a foundation for foreign policy”, as one of them argues. However, some of them say that young people generally see jobs in public institutions as less appealing than those that come with greater personal rewards.

In Azerbaijan, young diplomats usually receive their education in an elite Western-orientated or state university in Baku. They come from middle- or high-income families and, according to one Azeri student in international relations, view a job in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as “an aspiration and the goal for a future career”. They generally consider public sector jobs to be a privilege, a secure place of work that also provides social status. Young diplomats are among the most pro-Western and liberal government officials in Azerbaijan. They often speak several languages and have richer knowledge about the world than other officials (because they also have travelled more and sometimes lived abroad). However, in contrast to young diplomats in other Eastern Partnership countries, their

criticism of the government is usually mild. One young diplomat in Azerbaijan claims that the country respects personal freedoms, and that only older people are prone to “paranoia” about the government restricting these freedoms.

Belarus, like Ukraine, began to rebuild its diplomatic capacity shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union. In that era, the countries that would go on to join the Eastern Partnership had to create their diplomatic schools and foreign ministries virtually from scratch. As a result, their approach to diplomacy was relatively unaffected by the Soviet experience. In Ukraine, the situation has since changed dramatically due to the conflict with Russia; in Belarus, many young diplomats graduate not from their country’s school of diplomacy but from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), which is the heir to a Soviet institution. According to one Belarusian diplomat and graduate of the institute, “I cannot say that studying at MGIMO automatically makes you pro-Russian. I have never felt ideology there; the imposition of beliefs. Although I know that the situation is now changing for the worse. The experience of such study, like any soft power, works for sympathy for the country and people. But I have a negative attitude towards the state structure of modern Russia – its leadership and foreign policy.” In general, young Belarusian diplomats are not carriers of the Soviet cultural code. They often travel, have studied abroad, and do not see the world in terms of a cold war. One Belarusian diplomat described their worldview as being: “close to the values inherent in neutral countries”.

The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has the image of “the most liberal, pro-Western ministry”, as one young diplomat describes it. The institution has usually played a positive domestic role, by trying to restrain the *siloviki* (“men of force” from the military, security, and intelligence services), mitigate repressive practices, and counterbalance Russian influence. Before the recent crackdown, the ministry also advocated the development of civil society organisations. This largely determined the character, views, and values of young people who work there. They want Belarus to be less dependent on Russia, to have close and mutually beneficial relations with the EU and the US, and to be more democratic and open to the world. However, in the country’s increasingly repressive environment, Minsk’s acute conflicts with the West ensure that these same people work every day to keep the country moving in the opposite direction. This is reminiscent of Orwellian doublethink: young diplomats may identify themselves as liberals and admit that they despise the regime and want political changes but, as officials in the foreign ministry, they “vigorously justify torture and violence, facilitate the smuggling of people, and turn their homeland into a rogue state” – as one official described it.

# Young diplomats' views on domestic policy

## Democracy and governance

Most young diplomats in Eastern Partnership states are supportive of democracy and capitalism. However, some of them are critical of democracy, seeing it as not only a way towards progress and development but also a sign of weakness or a tool that Western powers use to promote their interests. Many of them demand domestic reforms. Young diplomats in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine even see success in foreign policy as dependent on such measures. Therefore, they are critical of the speed and transparency of their governments' reforms. Interestingly, many of them are concerned about climate change, gender equality, and digitalisation – suggesting an alignment with the current EU agenda. In contrast, young diplomats in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus do not appear to see these topics as important.

Young diplomats in Moldova say that the main challenges facing their country are corruption, weak public institutions, and an underperforming economy. They realise that these governance challenges have a negative impact on Moldova's international image, and hope that Sandu will improve the situation. Before the July 2021 parliamentary election (when the authors carried out much of the research for this paper), young Moldovan diplomats had high expectations of their country but also a sense of despondency about its future. One of them commented that “many countries consider the Republic of Moldova a country where the government steals and there is no proper governing ... We all have expectations from the new president; we will see what changes there will be, although many do not really believe that things can change.” Another diplomat believes that it would take a geopolitical earthquake to truly change Moldova. Others have much more faith in the country's agency. Interestingly, young diplomats rarely mentioned the Transnistrian conflict as a key challenge – which reflects their focus on corruption and governance, and their ambition to be on decent terms with Russia.

Territorial integrity is much more of an issue for young diplomats in Georgia – several of whom mention this as the main challenge facing their country. As one of them puts it, “security concerns are a hindrance for development. Without baseline security, it's hard to do anything else. It takes up a lot of resources. We have occupied territories, we are targeted, and Russia is smart about it.” They largely agree that Georgia needs more democratic reform – and the EU's assistance to achieve this – but differ on the sequencing of the process. One young diplomat says that, by joining NATO and the EU, Georgia could democratise, protect the liberty of its citizens, and become more prosperous. Another

notes that EU accession will require reforms first – and it is unclear how far Georgia will go on this score. The country’s young diplomats want it to become a democratic role model in the region. However, Russia might complicate that ambition: one interlocutor points out that “Russian soft power threatens pro-Western public sentiment. This problem is not tangible yet, but we must take more active steps to strengthen pro-Western attitudes. We have many steps to take in terms of democratisation.”

Ukraine’s young diplomats regard democracy, freedom, and pluralism as the attributes that will help the country become a regional leader. They see Ukraine as more advanced than other Eastern Partnership states, but note that the country still has a long way to go in transforming its governance model and society. They see European integration as a vehicle for democracy but have mixed views on the reforms the country has engaged in. One young diplomat notes that corruption is still a core problem in Ukraine that has caused many other reforms to fail. Another does not trust President Volodymyr Zelensky’s declared fight against oligarchs, suspecting that he might repeal sanctions against Viktor Medvedchuk in exchange for the return of prisoners held by the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic. For another diplomat, the fight against corruption may still face many obstacles but has been a major success, particularly in relation to the creation of the National Agency for the Prevention of Corruption and the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine. The country’s young diplomats see its territorial integrity as important and believe that Kyiv should regain control of Donbas, but say that that these factors are not the main obstacles to domestic reforms. Rather, they view these issues as mostly being foreign policy problems that result from Russia’s aggression.

In Armenia, young diplomats have varying views of democracy – ranging from scepticism and a loss of confidence in it to a belief that it is the only effective tool to fight the corruption that characterised the previous government. Indeed, some of them perceive democracy as having been “a weak foundation for Armenian diplomacy in the past three years”, arguing that it was dangerous for the Pashinyan government to rely on its democratic credentials to provide security (as it did during 2018-2020). However, one young diplomat who graduated from MGIMO claims that the loss of the 2020 war was not a result of the democratic policies undertaken by the government but of the inadequate military capacities and alliances that it inherited from its predecessor. At the same time, many young diplomats see Armenia’s move towards democracy as differentiating it from Azerbaijan and Turkey. They generally perceive the 2018 Velvet Revolution in the country as the beginning of a new era. This movement was led by young Armenians who demanded reforms and were motivated purely by domestic factors. Their primary concerns continue to be fair, transparent, and democratic elections; the fight against corruption; and economic development. Even after the loss of the 2020 war, Prime



Minister Nikol Pashinyan still largely receives their support – thanks to his domestic policy programme and rhetorical commitment to fighting corruption. One could see this in the country’s recent election, in which his party won 54 per cent of the vote.

In Azerbaijan, young diplomats are enthusiastic about the country’s victory in the war, which has eased public criticism of the authorities. They perceive Azerbaijan’s main problem as being its economic reliance on the energy industry: as oil production declines, the country will need to diversify into sectors such as agriculture. They also mention the development of Nagorno-Karabakh as an economic opportunity. Azerbaijan’s young diplomats acknowledge that their country is not a full democracy and doubt that it would be a good idea to adopt this political system. As one of them argues: “maybe we don’t need it completely right now, because it will lead to anarchy. Better to start at the municipal level.”

As discussed, Belarus’s foreign ministry has always been a kind of counterweight to repressive actors such as the *siloviki*. But this has helped disguise the authoritarianism of the Lukashenka regime. Young diplomats in Belarus say that they were shocked by the violent crackdown the government has engaged in since summer 2020. One of them contends that “the political weight of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has decreased significantly”, allowing special services and security ministries to make decisions mostly on their own – even where they concern foreign policy. There is also what another described as fear “hanging in the air of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ corridors”. Where Belarusian diplomats once discussed government decisions rather openly, they now engage in dialogues that “resemble a conversation between people ... [who suspect each other] of being a KGB informer”. All in all, most young Belarusian diplomats are pessimistic about their country’s future, appearing to reason that their careers will at least allow them to earn money while they are posted abroad. One of them justifies this decision by arguing that, “if I leave, another one will take my place – a less professional, less democratic, and less diplomatic one. So let it be me.”

## Leadership

Azerbaijan’s young diplomats generally support President Ilham Aliyev. They are proud of their country’s victory in the 2020 war and rarely criticise him – and, when they do so, are cautious about it. While they do not say that they favour hard authoritarianism, they remain loyal to the authorities.

The conflict had a powerful adverse effect on the views of young diplomats in Armenia. Some Armenian participants in the focus groups carried out for this paper say that the government is incompetent and describe Pashinyan as weak. This frustration means that, despite their broadly pro-European views, half of these participants express “respect and admiration” for Russian President

Vladimir Putin – with one of them arguing that “Armenia needs a strong leader like him to defend Armenian interests in a dangerous region at a dangerous time.”

Georgia’s young diplomats see oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili – rather than the prime minister or the president – as the true leader of the country. They express dismay about frequent changes of power-holders, which they regard as detrimental to Georgian foreign policy. As a result, they believe in ‘smaller’ government, a less prominent role for political leaders, and a greater emphasis on institutions and the law.

In Ukraine, Zelensky has introduced new people and new ways of working into the diplomatic service. While many young diplomats appreciate his attempts to reform the country, they are rather sceptical about his motivation and capabilities. The Presidential Administration has a strong influence on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but, according to one young diplomat, has “a very unconventional understanding of how diplomacy works”. As one former official in the president’s office said to an accredited ambassador, “if you want to solve a certain issue, you could go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ten times or to the president’s office one time”.

Moldova’s young diplomats are enthusiastic about anticipated changes in the country’s diplomacy under Sandu, seeing her pro-Western attitude as a welcome change from the outlook of her predecessor, Igor Dodon – who is backed by the Kremlin. They pointed to Sandu’s visit to Romania as a great achievement and sign of progress; Dodon did not visit Romania during his time in office, but regularly visited Russia. Indeed, they are still embarrassed about Dodon’s behaviour, particularly his public statement that Crimea is Russian territory. The new president, in contrast, features amongst young diplomats’ role models (alongside Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, and Queen Elizabeth II).

In Belarus, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been the government institution that is least loyal to President Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Since the start of the crisis in the country in August 2020, more than 10 per cent of Belarusian diplomats have publicly resigned, while others have quietly resigned or been fired for political reasons (many of them are under the age of 35). Those who continue to work for the government are reluctant to discuss Lukashenka, not least because ‘insulting’ or ‘slandering’ the president are criminal offences that are sometimes punished with three years in prison. Those who are willing to talk about the president are often critical of him and want him to leave office. This is because, as one young diplomat says, “27 years in power is too much”. Another comments: “some expected that he will change; others that he will organise a transition. But he keeps clinging to his absolute power and publicly admits that he can’t imagine himself without it.” One diplomat explains that he has chosen to stay at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs because “the voices of common sense must remain. Someone needs to fight for the country’s independence in these difficult internal and

international conditions – to try to push it in the right direction at least with small steps.”

## Young diplomats’ views on foreign policy

### The EU

In almost all Eastern Partnership countries, most young diplomats want their governments to develop a closer relationship with the EU. This desire appears to be particularly strong and durable in Association Trio states – due to the socio-economic development of the EU and the opportunities it provides to young people, as well as the nature of their countries’ relationships with Russia. For young Georgian and Ukrainian diplomats, Russia’s military aggression against their countries – which began in 2008 and 2014 respectively – has left them with no alternative. In the 2000s, many Ukrainian diplomats called for balanced relations between the EU and Russia – just as Moldovan diplomats do now. Now, Ukrainians see in Russia only threats and challenges.

One can sense this new state of mind in casual discussions with young diplomats. When Ukrainian diplomats say “before the war”, they mean ‘prior to the conflict with Russia’. A decade ago, they used the same phrase to mean ‘before the second world war’.

Yet Ukrainian, Georgian, and Moldovan diplomats regard the EU as an actor that punches below its geopolitical weight. Therefore, they do not perceive it as an effective guardian of their countries’ sovereignty and independence. One Georgian diplomat attributes this to the EU’s lack of understanding of “what modern Russia is ... The further you go from east to west, the more the correct perception declines. When you don’t know what kind of adversary you are dealing with, your tools are irrelevant. Diplomacy and negotiations are seen by Russia as a weakness and a green light to continue acting [aggressively].” Another Georgian diplomat sees the EU’s problem as being that it is “a global economic player but, to be a considerable political power, it needs much more unity”. One Moldovan diplomat expressed a similar view: “the EU has to become more geopolitical. If not in its neighbourhood, then where?”

Young diplomats in Association Trio countries see the EU as primarily a domestic player that has a key role in promoting domestic reforms, democratisation, and economic growth. However, they are increasingly disappointed with the lack of any real prospect of EU accession. They link successful EU integration to internal processes in their countries, with one Ukrainian diplomat saying that, “without the success of domestic reforms, we will be very limited in tools for advancing in the international arena and our political weight will remain insignificant.” Most of them are critical of their governments and believe that the progress of reforms is hampered by domestic political struggles,

corruption, and mismanagement.

Nevertheless, young diplomats in all three countries have grown somewhat weary of “rapprochement with no end in sight”. One diplomat from Georgia comments that “the process is irritating. We do our best and always get one and the same answer, no matter how much we do or do not do.” Young diplomats in Association Trio countries are also disappointed with the EU’s reaction to Russian military aggression, expressing a sense of abandonment and saying that they have little faith that this could change. They seem frustrated by the fact that, despite the efforts of their states, “we are not considered one of them – and that leaves us alone to face Russia”, as one Ukrainian diplomat in his 20s puts it. One of his counterparts in Georgia explains why this is so unlikely to change in the near future: “I think that the major problem here is the EU’s fear of irritating Russia rather than the quality of democracy and success with reforms.”

Another source of irritation is a model of interaction with the EU that, according to one Moldovan diplomat, is reminiscent of that “between a pupil and a teacher. We should strive for more equal, mature relations.” Another contends that the EU’s approach to negotiating with Association Trio countries damages their national pride: “I don’t like that Ukraine behaves like a beggar. It’s time for us to stop hoping that someone will solve our problems for us.” This claim is likely directed towards the Ukrainian authorities, but this perception affects the content of Ukraine’s dialogue with the EU.

In Armenia, young diplomats say that the 2020 war has led to the emergence of two distinct trends: “a deeper dependence on Russia as a security partner” and “a weakened commitment to Armenian ties to the West [both the EU and the US]”. Generally, they believe that, as one of them argues, “the EU failed to react to Azerbaijani and Turkish military aggression”. Another describes the consensus among them that the EU will need “to support Armenia and Karabakh with financial aid and political support” if it is to contribute to the development and democratisation of Armenia.

In Belarus and Azerbaijan, young diplomats are usually more most pro-Western than the governments they serve. They express a more positive attitude towards the EU than their older colleagues, even if some of them dislike what they see as its tendency to lecture their countries. This may be partly because those from Azerbaijan have opportunities to travel in the EU, sometimes through exchange programmes.

However, things are changing fast in Belarus. Due to the ongoing purges within the state apparatus, many employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are forced to carefully hide their sympathies for the EU. One Belarusian diplomat says that “what is happening now throws my country back many years. Not all EU values are close to me, but I know for sure that Belarus has a future only if it has good and close relations with Europe.” One of his colleagues holds a similar position: “to understand what

diplomats want, what they strive for, and how they would like to live, it is not even necessary to ask them about it. It is just enough to look at the competition for diplomatic postings at Belarusian embassies in EU countries, and everything becomes obvious. Even those who publicly rant about the ‘decay of Europe and its moral degradation’ for some reason strive to quickly leave for there from ‘prosperous and stable Minsk’.”

## Russia

Most diplomats who worked at the foreign ministries of Eastern Partnership countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s regard Russia with nostalgia for their student days and as a tough but important ally. However, younger diplomats have a dramatically different view. Russia has failed in its attempts to win its neighbours’ love with the use of military force. Instead, it is now difficult to find someone who calls Moscow a friend or even a partner among young diplomats in Georgia and Ukraine. They usually refer to Russia as an “aggressor”, “enemy”, or “rival” – with one Georgian diplomat even describing it as the “main spoiler and disrupter in the world and in the region” – and as backward and in decline. Another argues that Russia “wants to be a great power – which it is not – and hates to be ignored. Making a Machiavellian choice between love and fear, they prefer to be feared.”

Young diplomats in Association Trio countries see Russia’s foreign policy as an extension of its regime. And they express a strong sense that Moscow has betrayed them, that there is no prospect of mutually beneficial cooperation with it, and that it will use attempts to engage in such cooperation to undermine their countries’ sovereignty. All this leaves young Ukrainian and Georgian diplomats with an easy choice – they see their countries as part of the West and are sceptical about reconciliation with Russia. (This is likely to hold true for the next generation, who will remember Russia’s military aggression and will likely have family members who have suffered because of it.)

In Moldova, most young diplomats see their country’s future as being in Western democracy and values. However, unlike their colleagues in Ukraine and Georgia, many of them believe that their country should strive for normal and stable relations with Russia. One of them comments that “we should not be in a position to choose between the EU and Russia. Relations with Russia should be consistent and constructive.” Moldova is, like Ukraine and Georgia, engaged in a territorial conflict with Russia. But this generally inspires far less intense emotions in Moldovan diplomats than it does in their Ukrainian and Georgian counterparts. The former still regard the conflict in Transnistria – and related issues such as the illegal presence of Russian troops there – as the biggest obstacle to improving relations with Russia. However, according to one young diplomat in Moldova, the country has no option but to improve its economic, interpersonal, and political relations with Russia. Another

observes that “Russia has become increasingly assertive and aggressive in foreign policy, and will continue to be so in the near future.” One of his colleagues comments: “I see Russia fighting for its place in the world and [the Russians] will not stop and change their mind. Moscow is determined to follow its strategic objectives.”

Belarus may have spent years striving to balance its relations with Russia and the West, but this approach broke down during the outbreak of its political crisis in 2020. Having severed many of its links with the West, Minsk is left to face Moscow and its dreams of integrating Belarus into Russia. The Belarusian authorities publicly describe Russia as a brotherly country that resists the aggression of the EU and the US, but it is difficult to find a Belarusian diplomat who believes this. One young Belarusian diplomat says: “if you ask me who is the main ally of Belarus, then I will answer: ‘Russia’. But, if you ask who is our main rival and threat, I will answer the same.” This reflects the fear among many young officials in the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Lukashenka’s love of unlimited power will cost their country its independence. Indeed, one of them comments: “Russia now has all the trump cards in its hands, and it can take its time. Lukashenka simply has nowhere to run from these suffocating fraternal embraces.” At the same time, they are aware that the root cause of this problem is the Lukashenka regime’s unwillingness to accept the people’s choice and leave office peacefully.

In Azerbaijan and Armenia, the 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh produced opposing perceptions of Russia. Azerbaijan’s diplomats are generally satisfied with Russia’s refusal to support Armenia, its Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) ally, in the conflict. Nevertheless, despite this favourable position for Azerbaijan, Russia has ceded to Turkey its role of the main external actor in the conflict. One young political scientist from Azerbaijan says that “Turkey is the closest ally, and that is based on the idea of brotherhood. Turkey is a brother even if, politically, they are very different. Following the recent war, the reputation of Turkey in Azerbaijan has reached its peak. Relations with Russia are more complicated. Now, Russia has a peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the government of Azerbaijan just accepted that. Azerbaijan accepts Russia as a mediator, and it would not accept the EU.”

In Armenia, many young diplomats perceive Russia’s decision to stand aside as a betrayal – although they continue to see Moscow as Yerevan’s main ally. Most of them admit that the 2020 war has deepened Armenia’s dependence on Russia as a security partner. Some Armenian diplomats speak of the need for “a new strategy of diplomacy and a new, stronger, and [more] assertive foreign policy”. Some of them call for “even closer ties with Russia” while others argue that Russia has shown that it is “an unreliable and an unpredictable ally that wants to move closer to Azerbaijan at the expense of Armenia, and that it can no longer be dependable as a trusted security partner”. Several young

diplomats express frustration with the previous government's narrative that Russia is a reliable strategic partner that will help Armenia defend its territorial integrity at all costs. They suggest that Armenia should build up its own power and seek military self-sufficiency. And they are increasingly aware that Russia is no longer trustworthy, sometimes referring to the conflicts in Georgia and in Ukraine in this context. Their comments reveal a sense of frustration and helplessness at their perceived inability to influence Armenia's foreign policy or strategic decisions.

Young diplomats in Eastern Partnership countries may have differing views of Russia, but they are united in their scepticism of Russian-led regional organisations – the CSTO, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Georgian diplomats have the most critical attitude towards them of all, with one saying that Russia sees these organisations “as a tool to achieve its own goals and turns any inter-relationship into a political weapon”. Two other Georgian diplomats argue that “we learned the hard way that you cannot enter in multilateral agreements with Russia, because it never ends well” and that “an agreement reached with modern Russia is not worth the paper it's written on.”

Moldova's young diplomats see the EEU as a non-transparent structure that has no value for its members and is not compatible with Chisinau's ambitions of EU integration. However, most of them see the CIS as having some economic potential; one describes the organisation as “a good regional format to interact with central Asian countries where we don't have embassies”. Some of their Armenian counterparts criticise the EEU for “not meeting expectations and for failing to offer Armenia trade opportunities.”

In general, Belarusian diplomats see the EEU as an important resource for promoting their country's economic interests. But they recognise that its potential is limited by artificial exceptions and restrictions imposed by Russia. One of them explains his scepticism of the CIS as follows: “what kind of efficiency can we talk about if a meeting of heads of state from ten participating countries lasts an average of 1.5 hours? They hardly manage to read the texts from papers – and would rather go to lunch.” He comments that this is an important format for annual in-person meetings, but adds that they turn into a series of bilateral meetings at which “everyone wants to meet Putin and ask for money”.

## The US

In Georgia and Ukraine, young diplomats' perceptions of the US are diametrically opposed to their views of Russia. They see Washington as a “counterweight to Moscow”, “capable of stopping its aggression”, a key military ally, and a guarantor of national security and territorial integrity. And they

regard partnership with the US as a precondition for the settlement of military conflicts with Russia. Some Georgian diplomats even want the US to establish a military base in their country and to provide security guarantees outside the NATO framework. Former president Donald Trump was repeatedly mentioned in these authors' discussions with Ukrainian and Georgian diplomats about the role of the US. They see his goal to "make America great again" as worryingly isolationist, and a source of anxiety and instability. In contrast, they see promise in President Joe Biden's agenda, particularly his pledge to restore America as a leader in the world. And they underline the United States' influence on reforms in Ukraine and Georgia, as well as the importance of its guiding role when things go awry.

Moldovan diplomats have a similar view of the US. They describe it as "the world's policymaker", "the world's policeman", and "the number one actor". They would like to deepen the US-Moldova relationship – which they view as crucial – and hope that Moldova will not just benefit from American assistance but also become a credible partner of the US in the region. Some of them mention Georgia as an example to follow in this. However, they fear that high-level US officials pay little heed to Moldova and, accordingly, "could be tempted to use it as a bargaining chip" – as one young diplomat put it.

These kinds of geopolitical considerations permeate most Belarusian diplomats' assessments of the US. As one of them argues, "the US and Russia do not leave eastern European countries with the possibility of a compromise. [Both sides demand] selfless, exclusive love." They view this inflexibility as the reason for the wars in Ukraine and Georgia, as well as other territorial conflicts and crises in eastern Europe. At the same time, many diplomats admit that, because Lukashenka's efforts to stay in power have destroyed relations with the US, the choice has effectively been made. One young diplomat describes the US as "an ideological defender of rights, freedoms, and democracy around the world", while another calls it "the world's main mess-maker". But, at the same time, they all agree that it is necessary to cooperate with the US because it is the most powerful country in the world – and to maximise the benefits of this cooperation.

For young Armenian diplomats, the US is a unique long-time supporter of their country. This perception can be largely explained by two factors. The first is the sizeable Armenian-American diaspora community, which is a significant source of financial support, remittances, and investment for Armenia. The second is the politically powerful Armenian-American lobby in Washington. According to one young Armenian diplomat, the Biden administration's recognition of the Armenian genocide was a historic move for which young Armenians will "forever be grateful". He believes that Yerevan should use the momentum from this to persuade the US to mediate on the normalisation of Turkey-Armenia relations. Despite the fact that it depends on Russia for security and engages with Iran, Armenia "has been able to successfully balance its relations with the US", as one young diplomat



argued. Yerevan has always tried to carefully manage this tension with US policy – and has only occasionally encountered problems in doing so.

## NATO

Young Georgian and Ukrainian diplomats' positive attitudes towards the US appear to shape their perceptions of NATO. Today, almost all of them see integration into the alliance as a natural choice. Ukrainian and Georgian policy elites viewed NATO as a threat in the late 1980s, and were sceptical of the idea of joining the alliance in the 1990s. One mid-career Ukrainian diplomat recalls that, when then-president Viktor Yushchenko declared Euro-Atlantic integration to be a foreign policy priority, some ambassadors simply removed mentions of the idea from their speeches. But Ukrainian and Georgian diplomats' perceptions of NATO have changed a great deal since the Orange and the Rose revolutions, especially in the wake of Russian military aggression against their countries.

Nevertheless, their fatigue and disappointment with the process of integration into NATO resembles their feelings about EU accession. “We were not appreciated as much as we should have been. This constant, singular status quo is tiring”, says one young Georgian diplomat. According to young Ukrainian diplomats, political support does not lead to decisive action by NATO. And they are concerned that, as one of them puts it, “fear of a global armed conflict” and fear of provoking Russian aggression “will always stand between Ukraine and NATO”.

In Moldova, young diplomats regard NATO membership as a divisive issue. So, they are generally happy to maintain their country's neutrality (as are most Moldovan citizens). One young diplomat suggests that “joining NATO will increase the temperature of the dialogue with Russia”. According to another, “Moldova is not prepared for such a confrontation and has no need for it.” Most young Moldovan diplomats agree that cooperation with Western countries should focus on strengthening Moldova's security and defence sectors, as well as its institutions. As one of them argues, “within any formats possible, we should engage in cooperation with NATO counterparts, having in mind how sensitive this could be internally.”

Minsk accuses NATO of “trying to tear off a piece of” western Belarus. Young Belarusian diplomats may react to such statements with a sardonic smile, but they see a potential threat in cooperation with NATO. One of them says that “Belarus has driven itself into a trap, and now any attempts to improve relations with NATO will be harshly suppressed by Russia. It is difficult to predict what Russia will be ready to do now in order to prevent this.” Though NATO remains unpopular among citizens of Belarus more broadly, as well as among young Belarusian diplomats, one official admits that the country could have protected its sovereignty by joining the alliance in the 1990s: “then was our

chance; now, it's an unattainable dream.”

## China

Young diplomats in Eastern Partnership countries primarily view China's international role through the lens of economic expansion and a kind of neo-colonialism based on investment. They say that China uses economic instruments to gain broader political influence, and to push countries to acquiesce to its human rights violations and undemocratic political system. As one junior diplomat from Georgia puts it, “if we divide the world into defenders of liberal order and opposers of such an order, China would be on the other side from us.”

This is why young diplomats have an ambiguous attitude towards closer bilateral cooperation with Beijing. Most of them agree that economic cooperation with China has great potential, and support efforts to strengthen technological and even cultural ties with the country. One Ukrainian diplomat comments that “China is not a choice, bad or good. This is a given. And we have to do something with this activity, and determine the maximum of something positive for our country and not just stand aside.” One Moldovan diplomat agrees that “we should explore mostly economic promotion in both ways: attract investments and promote exports. But national interests are key.”

At the same time, many young diplomats fear that it is impossible to engage in purely economic cooperation with a non-democratic country. “We should constantly have in mind that the values that China is promoting worldwide are not in line with our interests”, argues one young Moldovan diplomat. A young Georgian diplomat comments that “we know of cases when China deals with issues in such a way that, at some moment, you may find that a large part of critical infrastructure is in its hands due to debt.”

Young diplomats acknowledge the political and economic tension between China and other powers, including the EU and the US. They recognise the difficulties this could cause for their countries. One Moldovan official recommends an effort to develop bilateral relations with China in a way that “will not create problems with ... major Western partners, which are in different degrees of confrontation with Beijing”. One young Georgian diplomat wants “to make sure the US is on board. We don't need to sacrifice our ties with the US for possible economic gains from China.”

Belarusian diplomats generally have positive attitudes towards China, albeit with some caveats. Due to its tense relationship with the West, Belarus favours partnership with China as a way to balance its enormous economic and political dependence on Russia. At the same time, the authoritarian nature of the Chinese and Belarusian regimes means that bilateral cooperation avoids what one young

Belarusian diplomat calls the “headache of respect for human rights and democratic principles”. China also uses soft power effectively in Belarus; hundreds of Belarusian officials at various levels of seniority visit China each year for educational and business purposes. Beijing builds stadiums, swimming pools, and other social infrastructure in Belarus. Another young Belarusian diplomat says that “cooperation with China offers us tremendous opportunities. Unfortunately, Belarus has no other such opportunities with other states under the current authorities.” One of his colleagues points out that, “because of strong stereotypes, for many senior diplomats, China is primarily the Red Guards, Mao, and poverty. And, for the young, it’s Xiaomi, skyscrapers, and TikTok.” At the same time, young Belarusian diplomats note that they are, as one of them contends, “frightened by the Chinese model of digital dictatorship and the transfer of such technologies and experience to Belarus”.

Similarly, young Armenian diplomats describe China as a foreign policy priority, with one saying that, “beyond Russia or the West, Armenia needs to push for balance, and must build ties to new allies.” Another argues that Armenia should “promote itself within the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and other cases and opportunities where China is a rising power”. One even says that “Armenia did not offer much to China” and suggests that the former should “back the Chinese policy on Taiwan in the UN” to send a strong signal to Beijing, thereby strengthening ties between China and Armenia.

Ukrainian diplomats also pin their hopes on China in relation to Russia, albeit for a different reason. They expect that, in the medium term, China will weaken Russia’s international position, including in the regional organisations in which Moscow currently plays a leading role. One estimates that “Russia will have less time to deal with Ukraine because they will have to look at China more as a challenge to their post-Soviet hegemony ... Beijing is already outrunning Russia in most of the states of central Asia and is challenging its position in the entire region.”

## The Eastern Partnership

Young diplomats in Eastern Partnership countries understand the benefits of regional cooperation and good relations with their neighbours. They are open-minded and pragmatic, but are generally concerned that such cooperation has become increasingly challenging in recent years. The hostility between Armenia and Azerbaijan has been particularly intense since the onset of the 2020 war, which redrew the map, reopened old wounds, and affected their relations with other states. Moreover, the devastating crackdown in Belarus – which involves widespread violations of human rights – has changed the dynamics of regional cooperation.

Most young diplomats are concerned about not only the brutality of the Belarusian regime but also the way in which its increasing dependence on Russia has degraded the security situation in the

region. In some Eastern Partnership countries, however, young diplomats still regard the relationship with Belarus as important and believe that their governments should maintain links with the regime – mainly for economic reasons. There is also a growing rift between Eastern Partnership countries that vigorously pursue a pro-EU agenda and those that do not.

Young diplomats in Association Trio countries have a common view of regional cooperation as crucial to EU integration. They trust the Eastern Partnership format to achieve this, but are worried about how growing political and security instability in some countries in the region will affect the overall project.

Young Moldovan diplomats view their country as a force for peace in the region; some are even hopeful that their country will soon be, as one of them puts it, the “regional example of the country with largest reforms and closest ties with the EU”. They regard Romania and Ukraine as key strategic partners, especially in supporting Moldova’s EU integration and resolving disputes such as that over Transnistria. They view relations with Georgia and Ukraine as necessary to promoting the Association Trio and advancing their ambitions for closer ties to the EU. They believe that Moldova should focus cooperation with Armenia and Azerbaijan on non-politicised issues. Since the 2020 war, they have generally become more sceptical of developing closer relations with the two countries, due to what one young Moldovan diplomat calls “unmatching goals and alliances”.

In Georgia, young diplomats place neighbourly relations at the heart of their EU ambitions. They view Moldova and Ukraine as crucial to this, with some even saying that regional integration between Association Trio countries would improve their relations with the EU. They see Georgia as the most Western and pro-democratic country in the region, and believe that it has the capacity to become a regional model of democratisation. They look to Ukraine as an example of a resilient and powerful actor from which Georgia can learn – especially in terms of developing a foreign policy that attracts international attention and support.

Similarly, Ukraine’s young diplomats believe their country should strengthen its relationships with Georgia and Moldova, due to their common goals of building resilience against the security threat from Russia. Some of them even argue that it would make strategic sense for Association Trio countries to cooperate in sectors such as information security and cyber-security. They see Ukraine’s relationship with Belarus as being on hold for the moment; some of them are disappointed that Kyiv has not taken a stronger public stance in support of the Belarusian democratic movement.

Thanks to the Lukashenka regime’s electoral fraud and violent crackdown, most countries in the region support the Belarusian opposition in exile. Only Russia has stayed loyal to the regime, which has indulged in aggressive rhetoric and created artificial migration crises on the borders of Lithuania,

Latvia, and Poland. However, young Belarusian diplomats secretly criticise their government's decision to suspend participation in the Eastern Partnership. They advocate a return to constructive dialogue and are, as one of them puts it, "uncomfortable working in such hostile international conditions". They would like Belarus to regain its image as an international mediator between Russia and other post-Soviet countries – or what another refers to as a kind of "bridge between eastern and Western civilisations". According to one young Belarusian diplomat, Belarus is unique because its position between two political projects allows it to compare them and make a choice: "you come to Smolensk, see the state of the roads, assess the standard of living, and then go, for example, to Bialystok and do the same. Such trips greatly influence worldview and geopolitical preferences, especially among young people who do not want to waste their lives waiting for a 'bright future' like their parents did."

Young diplomats in Azerbaijan largely view their country's relations with other Eastern Partnership states through the lens of their support for its territorial integrity and their positions on the recent conflict with Armenia. They are attracted by the West but also cautious about adopting a pro-Western outlook. Therefore, while they view the relationship with Georgia as strategically important, they express slight concern about how the country's European orientation could become an obstacle in the relationship or even a problem for the entire region. They see Ukraine as an important partner and a supporter of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. And they believe that Armenians have been much more effective than them in pursuing an active foreign policy – especially in relation to France – and that Azerbaijan needs to build up its capacity to improve its international image. However, some young diplomats in Azerbaijan do not oppose Georgia's and Ukraine's European orientation, believing that it is important to maintain good relations even with neighbours that have significantly different political projects. One of them emphasises the need for cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia due to their common interests as neighbours. And she favours the normalisation of relations between Baku and Yerevan for the sake of the security and well-being of Armenians and Azerbaijanis who live in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia's young diplomats are generally distressed about the situation in their country, which they say is in crisis in both domestic and foreign affairs. They have real security concerns following the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh and express disappointment about the positions that some of Armenia's neighbours have taken on the conflict. They are particularly critical of Georgia's stance, with one saying that Tbilisi's decision to allow the "open passage of arms and supplies from Turkey to Azerbaijan" through its airspace were not the actions of "a friendly neighbour". They are also upset with Ukraine's support for Azerbaijan. They admit that Armenia has had difficulty positioning itself on the crisis in Belarus because of the strong relationship between the two countries. One young

diplomat in Armenia claims that, despite the outcome of the 2020 war, the country will have to find a way to establish a dialogue with Azerbaijan. She argues that Pashinyan's victory in the recent election shows that the prime minister's supporters – most of whom are young – are ready to accept the defeat and focus on the future. However, the political climate in Armenia and Azerbaijan will likely continue to hamper regional cooperation in the short term, further distancing them from Association Trio countries.

## Conclusion

Young diplomats in Eastern Partnership states often emphasise their differences, but they have much in common – not least their shared aim to distance their countries from the Soviet era. They are similar in their diplomatic skills and pragmatism, as well as in what one of them calls the “constructive patriotism” of their strong desire to build better countries for future generations. They are children of independence who are motivated to work in state institutions by a sense of duty and a wish to contribute to their country's democratic and economic development. Most of them were educated in state schools and are proud of their countries' culture and history. And they are driven not only by patriotism but also by a belief in change and progress.

Although some Eastern Partnership countries are struggling with increasing Russian military aggression, internal political crises, and even armed conflict, their young diplomats are optimistic and surprisingly pro-European. Their pro-Western sentiments vary but, with a few exceptions, they favour closer relations with the EU. For diplomats from Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, this is a natural choice. But even diplomats from Armenia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan have a much more favourable attitude towards the EU than their governments officially do.

As the EU works to revitalise the Eastern Partnership, it should account for young diplomats' views in the following areas:

- They see recruitment in their foreign ministries as increasingly meritocratic. The systems of selection and career advancement for diplomatic staff have become fairer and more inclusive in all Eastern Partnership countries. However, young diplomats still face many glass ceilings, particularly in relation to gender equality and nepotism.

- They tend to critically analyse the actions of their countries' leaderships and avoid unquestioning loyalty to their leaders. They prefer to trust institutions rather than individuals. Only in Azerbaijan do most young diplomats express almost unconditional support for the national leader.
- Most young diplomats link success and failure in foreign policy to the domestic situation. However, many of them in Association Trio countries are noticeably fatigued and dissatisfied with the lack of a path to EU and NATO membership, despite the success of domestic reforms.
- They all regard the EU as an important economic player but a weak geopolitical actor.
- Young diplomats in Georgia and Ukraine share a strong anti-Russian sentiment that appears to be irreversible. In Moldova, despite the Transnistrian conflict and the country's aspirations to join the EU, they advocate pragmatic and constructive relations with Russia, even under the current Russian leadership. There has been a marked decrease in support for Moscow even among diplomats who represent the countries that are most loyal to Russia – Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Belarusian diplomats see Russia as both an ally and the main threat to their country's sovereignty. Their counterparts in Armenia are disillusioned with Russia due to its position on the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. And those in Azerbaijan say that Turkey has overtaken Russia as their country's main ally and partner.
- All young diplomats in Eastern Partnership countries recognise the special role of the US as the world's largest military and political power. Those in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova are the most supportive of efforts to deepen bilateral relations with the US. Those in Belarus and Armenia admit that they would like to maintain good relations with the US but acknowledge that the confrontation between Washington and Moscow usually forces their countries to take the Russian side.
- Young diplomats in Georgia and Ukraine consider NATO and the US to be the main reliable partners of their countries in relation to security and territorial integrity. Moldovan diplomats see NATO as an important ally and partner, but fear how Russia would react if Moldova joined the alliance. As a result, they believe that their country should maintain its neutral status. Their counterparts in Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan generally have a cautious and sceptical attitude towards NATO.
- All young diplomats in Eastern Partnership states see China as a rising geopolitical and economic power. They express a desire to harness this for the development of their countries

and notice how effective China has been at using its soft power in recent years. However, young diplomats in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are concerned that close economic relations with China could lead to an unacceptable dependence on Beijing, threaten national security, and damage relations with the US and the EU. In Belarus, young diplomats see Beijing as a force that can balance Minsk's dependence on Moscow – as Brussels once did.

- Young diplomats generally believe that Eastern Partnership states should strengthen their relationships with one another, especially in the economic sphere. Those in Association Trio countries argue that this is about not just cooperating bilaterally but also joining forces in pursuit of their common goal – EU integration. However, the 2020 war between Azerbaijan and Armenia has distanced the two countries from Association Trio states. Similarly, the political crisis in Belarus concerns many young diplomats in Eastern Partnership countries, who worry about the deteriorating security situation that comes with the Belarusian regime's increasing brutality and dependence on Russia.

As the interviews conducted for this paper show, young diplomats in Eastern Partnership countries are open to a closer relationship with the EU. The bloc does not need to fight for their hearts and minds, but rather to capitalise on the pro-Western sentiment that is especially apparent in Association Trio countries. Young diplomats' attitudes towards Russia are less positive, but its policies in the region are much bolder than the EU's. Russia does not consider the bloc's wishes or reactions; it just acts and creates facts on the ground – which is why it still plays such an important role in Eastern Partnership countries. The EU should build on young diplomats' goodwill towards it, develop closer relationships with these countries, and thereby increase its political and economic leverage in the region. But, to achieve this, it will need to take more assertive action. At the moment, the relationship between Eastern Partnership countries and the EU is one of unrequited love. If the EU does not reciprocate, these countries may eventually surrender to another suitor, be it Russia, China, or Turkey.

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[1] Anonymous interviewee, June 2021. All interviews and focus groups were conducted between June and September 2021. Full anonymity was guaranteed for the participants.

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