

# Looking East

Joining the Eastern Partnership has proven valuable for EU partner nations

By *per Concordiam* Staff

**The former Soviet republics of Georgia and Moldova each have taken a big leap toward European integration. On November 28, 2013, leaders of the two countries initialed Association Agreements with the European Union, committing them to a path of economic and democratic reform. The hard work of implementing those reforms is just beginning, and if Georgia and Moldova formalize the agreement in September 2014, the EU will remove some trade and travel barriers with those countries.**

Moldovans rally in favor of European Union integration on Great National Assembly Square in Chisinau in November 2013.



REUTERS

The agreements were reached through the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP), a multilateral cooperative initiative between the EU and six former Soviet republics from Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. The EaP advances concepts such as the rule of law, human rights and democracy to improve security and open new markets to a region deemed strategically important. Within the forum of the EaP, each partner country negotiates a bilateral Association Agreement with the EU based on the country's specific progress and priorities.

"The Eastern Partnership is an EU policy aimed at bringing our eastern neighbors closer to the European Union," said EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle. "The EU's support for democratic and economic reforms in the neighborhood helps to strengthen stability and prosperity, which brings direct benefits to the citizens, both in these countries and in the EU."

### Eastern Perspective

The EaP is the "eastern dimension" of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The EU launched the ENP in 2004 with the aim of building prosperity and democracy in neighboring regions. In addition to the Eastern Partnership, the ENP includes the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership with countries from North Africa and the Middle East, and Black Sea Synergy to encourage regional economic cooperation in the Black Sea basin.

The EaP was initiated in 2009 to foster closer political and economic relations among the countries of the EU and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The idea for the EaP originated in the Polish Foreign Ministry, which partnered with Sweden to present it to the rest of the EU.

Poland has a long-held interest in improving relations with its eastern neighbors and drawing them closer to the EU, particularly Ukraine, with which it has significant historical and cultural ties. Even before its own accession to the EU, Poland pushed for increased EU engagement with the East.

According to *The Telegraph* of London, the central reason for the EaP is to encourage the eastern neighbors to "look to Brussels, not Moscow, for future leadership." Despite the desire to more deeply integrate Eastern Europe with the EU, neither membership in the EaP nor an Association Agreement guarantees a path to EU membership. Expansion fatigue has arisen in many European countries since Bulgaria and Romania were admitted in 2007. Perhaps more importantly, Russia strongly opposes further EU



Acting-Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseny Yatseniuk attends an emergency summit of European leaders in Brussels in March 2014 to discuss Ukraine and the Russian occupation of Crimea.

expansion into the former Soviet space, and some EU members see little value in "rocking the boat" of fruitful commercial ties with Moscow.

### Structure and Programs

Economic integration with the EU — a fundamental purpose of the EaP — is formalized through a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). According to the EU, the DCFTA gives the partner country "enhanced access to the European market" and the tools to modernize. It also incentivizes reforms by requiring the partner country to conform to a wide range of EU standards and regulations. The EU helps finance institutional reform, democratization and economic and social development programs. Examples include the Comprehensive Institution Building Programme and the Pilot Regional Development Programme, both established in 2011.

The EU has distributed substantial bilateral aid packages to partner nations since 2010, including 596 million euros to Ukraine and 339 million euros to Moldova. Programs supported by the aid include vocational training in Armenia, environmental protection in Belarus and border security in Ukraine and Moldova.

Multilateral platforms were established to support reforms and exchange best practices on topics such as good governance, economic integration and energy security. The EU has used flagship initiatives to "give substance and focus to multilateral cooperation" in border management, small- and medium-size business support, energy efficiency, disaster response, civil society and education.





AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Moldovan Prime Minister Iurie Leancă, left, speaks with French President François Hollande at the European Union's Eastern Partnership Summit in November 2013 in Vilnius, Lithuania, where Moldova initialed an Association Agreement.



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Acting Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Minister Andrii Deshchytzia, right, welcomes Polish Foreign Affairs Minister Radosław Sikorski to Kiev in March 2014.

### Partnership Unraveling

Just as the EaP appeared to be bearing fruit, it faces new and substantial challenges. Ukraine, which was supposed to sign its Association Agreement (initialed in March 2012) at the November 2013 EaP Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, declined to sign under pressure from Russia and in turn was awarded \$15 billion in loans and a deep discount in natural gas prices by Moscow. Armenia also backed out of initialing its Association Agreement — fearing the loss of Russian security guarantees in the face of the country's troubled relations with Azerbaijan — and promised to join the Russian-led Eurasian Union trade bloc instead.

**“What happens in the countries in Eastern Europe and the southern Caucasus matters to the EU. As the EU has expanded, these countries have become closer neighbours, and their security, stability and prosperity increasingly affect the EU’s.”**

— Eastern Partnership policy statement

Russia sees the EaP as a threat to its regional influence, particularly in Belarus and Ukraine. Shortly after the EaP was launched, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the EU of trying to establish a “sphere of influence to pull countries away from taking sovereign decisions.”

After moderating its criticism for several years, Russia took aggressive steps in November 2013 to keep EaP countries from establishing closer relations with the EU.

According to Carnegie Europe, “Russia’s increasingly assertive tactics have chipped away at the ties that bind the six Eastern Partnership countries to the EU, and the entire Eastern Partnership is on the verge of unraveling.”

But the EaP is not “one size fits all.” As Lithuanian Foreign Ministry official Juris Poikāns pointed out, the EaP was established with the understanding that partner states have different levels of ambition regarding EU membership, making them open to different levels of engagement. Georgia and Moldova have clearly chosen closer integration than Belarus or Armenia. Azerbaijan, self-assured in its energy wealth, seeks only trade and visa agreements.

But Ukraine is crucial, with its population of more than 45 million and substantial economic capacity, not to mention an important geopolitical location. Former Kremlin official Gleb Pavlosky told Reuters in November 2013 that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s dream of a Eurasian Union, built from the former Soviet states and centered on Russia, “is impossible without Ukraine.” “Losing Ukraine would be a massive blow to Russia,” James Nixey of Chatham House told the *Guardian* in October 2013. “Ukraine is viewed by Putin as part of Russia. He’ll ask himself, how can you be a great power if this huge appendage is lopped off?”



A Ukrainian demonstrates against Russian involvement in Ukraine, holding a sign that says, "Putin, if you love us, let us go!" in front of the Russian Embassy in Kiev in December 2013. The pumpkin is the symbol of a rejected marriage.

REUTERS

But Ukrainian opinion is split. A majority in the western and northern districts appears to favor a European path; eastern and southern districts with large ethnic Russian populations are more Moscow-oriented. The Ukrainian government's initial refusal to sign the EU Association Agreement ignited massive protests in the streets of Kiev that ended with the removal of President Viktor Yanukovich from power. An interim Ukrainian government led by the former opposition signed an Association Agreement in March 2014 as Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula.

### Enduring Partnerships

Despite opposition from Russia, EU engagement in former Soviet states will persist. Carnegie Europe concludes that the EU can best help by

"offering an alternative to Russian forms of power projection," which it calls a zero-sum game.

The EU should not be seen as competing with Russia for influence and power in the EaP countries, Carnegie says, but should proceed with a "positive-sum" approach. The EU should reward eastern neighbors for making real reforms in areas such as corruption and judicial independence rather than slowing progress and impeding relations by dwelling on less critical technical, bureaucratic and administrative hurdles.

"What happens in the countries in Eastern Europe and the southern Caucasus matters to the EU," the Union says in its Eastern Partnership policy statement. "As the EU has expanded, these countries have become closer neighbours, and their security, stability and prosperity increasingly affect the EU's." □