





ISTOCK

The European Union's
**EASTERN
PARTNERSHIP**

From Vilnius to Riga

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The Ukrainian government's abrupt decision in November 2013 to postpone the long-awaited signing of its European Union Association Agreement brought hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians into the streets. The massive demonstrations indicate that vast change has taken place in this part of the world. The Ukrainian decision to delay economic integration with Europe may cause some to label the 2013 Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, as a failure, but the Ukrainian people have shown that the "European perspective" is still attractive to millions of people in Eastern Europe. What can be done before the 2015 summit in Riga, Latvia, to facilitate this change?

The Eastern Partnership is not necessarily about EU enlargement. Rather, it is a platform creating closer links with the six partner nations — Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The ultimate goal of the Eastern Partnership has never been clearly de-

Eastern Partnership countries improve their prospects for future membership, provided they complete the required reforms — a process some partners are undertaking. The Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—are integral members of the EU. Their experiences vividly show that the hard work and commitment to become a member will pay off in the end. Since joining in 2004, all three countries experienced unprecedented economic growth, reaching as high as 12 percent annually before 2008. Estonia and Latvia have joined the eurozone, and Lithuania should join them in 2015.

From the beginning of the Eastern Partnership, the EU recognized that every partner state may have different ambitions regarding EU membership and, therefore, remains open to various levels of engagement, as demonstrated at the 2013 Vilnius summit. Georgia and Moldova initialed their respective EU association agreements and have stated their intent to proceed with the ratification process in 2014. In addition, visa-free travel in the EU should soon be a reality for ordinary Moldovans because they have made noteworthy progress in meeting EU requirements.

At the same time, as a result of domestic political conflicts and Russian economic pressure, Ukraine unexpectedly declined to sign an association agreement. The proposal remains on the table. In September 2013, Armenia dropped its plans to sign an association agreement and declared its intention to join the Russian-led Customs Union, joining Kazakhstan and Eastern Partnership member Belarus. Azerbaijan is seeking its own unique relationship with the EU, with separate trade and travel agreements. The EU has met these different levels of ambition with understanding.

The next Eastern Partnership Summit will be in Riga in the first half of 2015, when Latvia holds the presidency in the Council of the European Union. Several areas of common interest for the EU and the six Eastern partners, including energy, environment, transportation, and justice and home affairs,

defined; it is more a process with horizons yet to be determined. Through the Eastern Partnership, the EU seeks to enhance stability along its eastern borders and improve political and economic engagement with the partner nations by strengthening the rule of law, the business environment and people-to-people contacts. To achieve these goals, the EU offers closer political association and economic integration via association agreements that include comprehensive trade accords and dialogues that can lead to visa-free travel throughout the EU.



Participants in the European Union's Eastern Partnership Summit gather in November 2013 in Vilnius, Lithuania, where association agreements with Georgia and Moldova were initialed.

AFF/GETTY IMAGES



Ukrainian pro-EU demonstrators gather in front of the Russian Embassy in December 2013 to support closer trading ties with EU members.



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Moldovans buy flowers in Chisinau in October 2013. Eastern Partnership member Moldova, the poorest country in Europe, initialed an association agreement with the European Union that is expected to greatly improve the country's economic situation.



Wine in barrels await bottling in Tbilisi in February 2013. Georgia, well-known in Eastern Europe for its wine and mineral water, initialed an association agreement with the European Union that should open new markets for the country's signature exports.

await discussion in Riga. Because each partner nation has defined its level of engagement with the EU differently, it is important that the Eastern Partnership remains a joint platform of cooperation.

However, the principle of differentiation should be applied. Partner nations that want a closer relationship with the EU should not be hostages to the Eastern Partnership. Implementing the association agreements, which envisage creating a deep and comprehensive trade area between the signatories and the EU, will require immense efforts by the partners to meet EU requirements. Technical assistance from the EU and its member states to overcome these challenges will be of utmost importance. Latvia stands ready to share its experience with the partners.

The EU strongly supports the sovereign foreign and trade policy choices of every partner state and believes that no pressure should be applied to influence these choices. The Eastern Partnership is not about geopolitical competition with the Russian Federation. Russia is an important EU partner in a wide range of fields, such as energy, topical foreign policy issues, trade and people-to-people relations. And the EU suggested a new EU-Russia agreement with a view of creating closer ties, demonstrating a readiness to deepen partnership with Russia.

The EU needs to work harder to explain the benefits of the Eastern Partnership to the people of partner states. The events in Ukraine demonstrate the growing maturity and influence of civil society. Issues such as the rule

of law or an open and predictable business environment are pertinent to every partner state to some extent, but civil society serves as an important catalyst for change, and these efforts deserve the support of the EU and its member states.

The EU needs a strategically oriented and long-term policy for both its eastern and southern neighborhoods. It is important to develop an Eastern Partnership policy that is embraced by all EU member states. Furthermore, it is essential to ensure the continuity of Eastern Partnership policy during the upcoming Greek and Italian EU presidencies.

The gradual global shift in economic and political influence away from the EU and the West, in general, dictates the ever increasing necessity to deepen integration within the EU itself. The remaining barriers that impede competition and growth must be abolished and the process of creating Europe “whole and free,” without dividing lines, based on the same understanding of values, completed. Every European state, regardless of its size and its geopolitical importance, has a role to play in this process.

Previous EU enlargements have brought unprecedented growth and stability to central and eastern Europe, greatly benefiting these societies. The Eastern Partnership might potentially serve as a motor to duplicate this success in the six partner states, but they will need to work hard. The EU must remain open to any efforts to facilitate this change; it is in our common interests. □