

ISSUE IN FOCUS

BY FRANCES G. BURWELL

# A Transatlantic Approach to Europe's East: Relaunching the Eastern Partnership

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To safeguard its own security, Europe must build a closer and more integrated relationship with the key countries of its Eastern Partnership (EaP). Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia must become priorities, and over the longer term, Europe must look for opportunities with Belarus, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. As long as these countries are poor, vulnerable to aggression, and politically unstable—some with frozen or active conflicts within their borders—they will erode the security of the rest of Europe. The Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga, Latvia, on May 20-21, 2015, offers a key opportunity for the European Union (EU) to confront this challenge by launching a reinvigorated EaP and, with the United States, a new Transatlantic Partnership for Wider Europe.

## A Partnership of Good Intentions

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the most successful foreign policy effort of the European and US governments was the integration of Central European states into NATO and the EU. NATO engaged these countries in a strategic discussion across the Atlantic while also teaching their militaries how to behave in a democracy. Accession to the EU was even more intrusive, requiring these new democracies to transform their economies and their judicial and political systems, while also bringing a convergence of their foreign policies. As the EU's border moved eastward, its attention also moved to its new neighbors.

In 2004, the EU proposed its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) as a way of reaching out to sixteen of its neighbors, in both the east and south, and developing stronger relations based on shared values, economic connections, and human and cultural connections, but without the expectation of eventual EU membership. The diversity of the neighbors led the EU to establish the Euro-Mediterranean partnership and the Black Sea Synergy in 2008. In 2009, the EU established perhaps its

### Transatlantic Relations Program

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most consequential outgrowth of the ENP, the Eastern Partnership with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Belarus. The EaP was intended to “accelerate the political association and further economic integration between the European Union and interested partner countries.” The EaP would focus on four “platforms”:

- democracy, good governance, and stability;
- economic integration and convergence with the EU;
- energy security; and
- people-to-people initiatives.

Progress was measured by how closely these countries came to adopting the EU's own policy and regulatory structure, the *acquis communautaire*. In time, successful partners were expected to negotiate an Association Agreement (AA) with the EU, the highlight of which would be a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA), which not only removed tariff barriers, but also sought to bring the partners' economic regulatory policy to an EU level. The EaP also aimed to create “mobility partnerships,” under which their citizens could qualify for visa-free travel to the EU.



Leaders gathered at the 3rd Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius in November 2013. *Photo credit:* Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2013.

This effort should not be seen as altruistic—it was widely believed that advancing the security and prosperity of these six partners would help build a more secure and prosperous EU. But in contrast with the process that brought the Central European countries into the EU, membership was not on the table for the EaP countries. Accession was not explicitly ruled out, but many EU members made clear their opposition to bringing in new members. Regardless of its progress, no partner country could count on being considered for membership for many years.

For a time, the EaP enjoyed some progress. In return for taking some steps toward reform, these countries received significant EU financial assistance,<sup>1</sup> and in some partner states, there was real progress in terms of economic and political reform. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine signed Association Agreements with the EU in 2014. All three eventually signed DCFTAs, although implementation of the Ukrainian agreement has been delayed until 2016. In Belarus, however, there was little progress at all; and, in Azerbaijan and Armenia—both of which, under Russian pressure, declined to pursue Association

<sup>1</sup> During 2010-2013, the EU made available €2.5 billion to the six EaP countries to meet the Partnership objectives. The countries were also eligible for funding from other EU instruments, such as ERASMUS scholarship support for students and the Horizon 2020 grant framework for research. See European Union External Action, “The Eastern Partnership—Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ),” [http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/faq/index\\_en.htm#8](http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/faq/index_en.htm#8).

Agreements—episodic progress was overshadowed by continuing problems of corruption, and human rights abuses. Six years after the start of the EaP, some partner countries had made progress, but others seemed to have turned away from the idea of joining Europe.

In some cases, the lack of progress was due to decisions by the partner governments, who found the needed reforms too difficult—or too threatening to corrupt interests. There was nothing in the EU toolbox that could tempt a dictator like Alexander Lukashenko to disrupt the system that kept him in power. Even when governments genuinely tried to move forward, there was no escaping the fact that the reforms required in an EU Association Agreement were incredibly difficult for any government, but especially those with limited institutional capacity.

The uneven progress of the partner countries was also due to their deteriorating security environment. When Central Europe originally moved to join NATO and the EU, Russia had been focused on its own domestic reforms and was too weak to threaten its former satellites. For a time, it even seemed that Russia might itself opt for closer partnership with the West, as indicated by the NATO-Russia Council. But by 2008, the situation had changed, as demonstrated by the Russian attack on Georgia. Its manipulation of the Azeri-Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, and its continuing support of

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the separatists in Transnistria sent a clear message to any who thought of challenging Russian hegemony in its border states. For a time, the Russian government ignored the Eastern Partnership, as its concern was focused on the possibility of further NATO expansion. It saw the EU as a weak institution focused on economic issues, with little political impact. But as Central Europe became more and more integrated within the EU—both economically and politically—Russian President Vladimir Putin reacted to prevent a similar path being taken by the EaP countries.

Confronted with this challenge, the EU and its member states were slow to respond. The EaP acted as a process between the EU and its partners, with no way to take into account the views of external actors. For many EU members, the East was simply not a priority—they were more focused on the eurozone crisis or the growing instability across the Mediterranean. Nor was the United States immediately engaged. It had focused on NATO enlargement, but this no longer seemed on the agenda for any of the EaP countries except Georgia; even there, membership was at best a long term prospect. With wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a growing focus on Asia, the US administration was content to leave this challenge to the Europeans.

The Ukraine crisis that began in late 2013 showed the poverty of the EU and US approaches. The failure of President Viktor Yanukovich to sign the EU Association Agreement at the Vilnius Summit demonstrated that the rather legalistic EU process was no match for power politics. Putin's annexation of Crimea and support for militant separatists in eastern Ukraine made clear to the other partners just how far he would go to stop alignment with the West.

### To Refine or Relaunch?

The EU now faces a choice. At the Riga Summit, the EU member states and the six Eastern Partnership countries will once again meet to discuss their future ar-

rangements. This will not be a negotiation: while each of the six partners can assert the type of relationship they want with the EU, and by extension, with the West, it is the EU that holds almost all of the cards: trade, financial support, visa facilitation, even the possibility of eventual membership. The EU's aim is clearly to have a stable neighborhood, and the consensus in Europe is that such stability is best achieved by having market oriented democracies next door. The question is how to reach that aim.

In one scenario, the EU could choose to modify the EaP by merely refining its current approach. In this option, the EU would reaffirm the right of any partner to choose its own future, and it would diversify the paths partners can take, allowing them to select the various elements—economic reform, political reform, etc.—on an à la carte basis. There will be more flexibility and fewer demands, as well as lowered expectations regarding how far the partners will progress and how much the EU will offer.

In a second scenario, however, the EU will relaunch the EaP, and then build on this with the United States to create a Transatlantic Partnership for Wider Europe. The ambition of the EaP will remain largely the same—to bring these countries into a stable political association with the EU and more closely integrate their economies with the European one. The EU will start by identifying the factors that make these countries vulnerable and unstable, and design strategies specifically to overcome each weakness, in some cases building on the experience of the EaP to date. Although each country will differ, most of the partners are vulnerable in the following areas: energy security; physical security; corrupt and underperforming economies; inadequate infrastructure; poor governance and administrative capacity; weak public support for reform; and human rights violations and poor judicial systems.

The EaP addressed all of these areas to some extent, but often required progress across all areas in order to unlock a strong EU commitment. The implementation of a relaunched EaP will differ in two important ways from the current partnership. First, each program will be designed to fit the circumstances of each partner; it will not automatically be assumed that the end point is the adoption of EU-like systems or the *acquis communautaire*. On some issues, and for some countries, that may be a desirable end, but probably not for all.

Second, there will be less of a quid pro quo, i.e., reform brings more financial support. The EU must recognize that its partners live in a complicated world and their progress in some areas will be limited in the short term. Lack of progress in political reform should not prevent assistance in developing greater energy supply



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diversity, for example. Instead, EU leaders should ask if addressing a particular issue in the partner countries is in Europe’s interest; if so, they should move forward where they can, including with financial support. Some will argue that the EU will end up supporting authoritarian governments, and that is always a risk. But by working to reduce vulnerabilities such as corruption, poor governance, and nonperforming economies, the EU will lay a stronger foundation for political reform. Nor is there anything preventing the EU from criticizing governments for antidemocratic behavior or human rights violations. But there will not be an automatic assumption that countries must move toward a European model in order to receive assistance in any area. Certainly, where it works, that would be a desirable end; but these countries should not be neglected because their current situation is too complicated to allow such an outcome in the short term.

The United States cannot stand idly by and simply leave this to Europe, however. The current challenge to the international order is also a threat to the United States, and Washington should thus be ready to help vulnerable states where it can. The EU will have to lead, as it has so much more at stake, given its proximity to these partners, and so much more leverage, both economic and otherwise. But the United States must actively support a new EaP. Its approach to these countries, including financial and technical assistance, should be harmonized with the EU approach wherever possible. The EaP should thus be embedded in a larger structure of consultation and assistance, the Transatlantic Partnership for a Wider Europe.

### Eastern Partnership 2.0

Building this new partnership must start with the EU. While US participation and support is required for success, the first steps must happen at the Riga East-

ern Partnership Summit. In particular, the EU should announce its intention to take the following steps, which are designed to reduce the vulnerabilities listed above:

**Create an Energy Union encompassing those EaP members who wish to belong and who will take on the responsibilities.** Most discussions of Energy Union—including the Commission’s February 2015 proposal—envision the new structure involving only EU members, while some of the EaP countries would continue their current memberships in the European Energy Community (Ukraine and Moldova are contracting parties, Georgia is a candidate country, and Armenia is an observer). The Energy Community is designed to bring the countries of the Balkans and Eastern Europe closer to the EU through gradual adoption of its energy-related *acquis communautaire*. Yet EU energy security will not be complete without the full engagement of some EaP countries. Instead of viewing the Energy Union as an exclusive club, EU members should recall that even Schengen includes some non-EU members; indeed there is considerable “variable geometry” within Europe. EaP countries that are already contracting parties or candidates in the EC should be given “candidate” status in the Energy Union. After satisfying a series of benchmarks based on EU energy regulation, including the third energy package—a major EU initiative designed to open energy and gas markets to competition—these countries could become full members of the Energy Union. This would achieve two important goals: bringing these countries into a more integrated energy framework with the EU that would enhance everyone’s energy security; and provide Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia with a closer sense of belonging to Europe. As for Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, if they decide later to join the EC, they could also progress down this same road; it would be their choice.

**Launch a campaign to win the “hearts and minds” of EaP citizens, using one of the EU’s best “weapons”—visa liberalization—and also creating alternative Russian-language media.** The EU is a “soft-power” superpower. Despite the financial crisis, despite the rise of anti-establishment parties both left and right, despite the regular disparagement of the EU from within its own borders, we should not forget that the people of the Maidan were protesting to join Europe. It was the failure of their government to pursue a European path that made them take to the streets. But this happens by accident—Europe does not have a strategy to win support among the citizens of neighboring states. Even the European Commission itself admitted being too late in issuing a fact sheet to correct the inaccuracies about the Association Agreement put forward by anti-EU factions in Ukraine. It is time for the EU to think strategically



Iurie Leanca, then Prime Minister of Moldova, and Catherine Ashton, then High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, shaking hands at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius, November 2013. *Photo credit:* Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2013.

about its reputation, and how to garner support within strategic populations, including those of the EaP states. The tasking of the European External Action Service with developing a plan to counter Russian propaganda is a good step forward. The EU should also be very public about what it is doing in terms of support for the governments of Ukraine and Moldova, and be alert to the need to counter misinformation about its own policies and actions. Most importantly, the EU should recognize the importance of allowing citizens from countries that meet the technical requirements to enter the EU for tourism and business visits. Nothing will have more impact than fast-tracking efforts to provide such access to the EU for EaP citizens. Ironically, it is easier for citizens of Argentina and Brazil to visit the EU visa free than most EaP citizens. Moldova qualified for visa-free travel in 2014, and there are hopes that Ukraine and Georgia may receive that status at the Riga Summit. Meeting those expectations would give the EU a powerful tool for encouraging those citizens on their European path.

**Provide support for further economic growth and reform, by providing greater market access, as well as financial and technical support required to attract greater foreign investment.** The EU will benefit enormously by having prosperous, stable economies on its borders and in its close neighborhood. The EU already provides extensive financial support for most of the EaP

countries. Perhaps just as important as this aid is the market access the EU has provided at key moments: in late 2013, quick access for Moldovan wine was granted after a Russian boycott went into force, and throughout 2014-15, unilateral market access was granted to Ukrainian products when the implementation of the DCFTA was delayed. The EU should now move forward on two fronts. First, those EaP countries that cannot manage—or do not want—a DCFTA, should be offered much more basic market access for key exports. This will not necessarily conflict with their obligations under the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), but will help build stronger economic ties with the West. A DCFTA should not be the only option for EU trade policy vis à vis these countries. Second, the EU should encourage greater private sector investment in the EaP countries, as this will be key to building stronger economies. The European Investment Bank has already allocated €600 million for rebuilding infrastructure in eastern Ukraine and for helping local small and medium enterprises recover.<sup>2</sup> But there should also be credit guarantees and other measures to help foreign investors who have considered investment even in western Ukraine but who are unwilling to take on the risks alone.

<sup>2</sup> European Investment Bank, “EIB Supports Early Recovery and SME Sector in Ukraine with EUR 600 Million,” December 22, 2014, <http://www.eib.org/infocentre/press/releases/all/2014/2014-301-eib-supports-early-recovery-and-sme-sector-in-ukraine-with-eur-600-million.htm>.



**Support efforts to strengthen government coherence and transparency, as well as anticorruption efforts, with both financial and technical assistance.**

If an economy is to flourish, corruption must not be any part of the normal way of doing business. The greatest safeguard against corruption is government transparency, both in its own dealings and in requiring this of the private sector. The EU has used such mechanisms as “twinning” officials—sending member state experts and officials to work alongside officials in other states—to enhance government capacities and expertise, and this should be continued if not enhanced. The EU can also financially support efforts of the EaP governments to put documents and processes on line, and also support civil society groups that focus on gathering and publishing information on government activities. The EU should also work with member state businesses active in EaP countries to ensure that they are not facilitating corrupt practices. Although boosting government coherence and fighting corruption with transparency seem relatively modest goals, they provide an essential foundation for sustainable democracy.

**Continue to point out shortcomings in terms of human rights abuses and violations of democratic norms, including freedom of speech and assembly.**

Under this relaunched EaP, the European Union will sometimes decide that strengthening a country’s energy infrastructure is important irrespective of the stage of its democratic development. That does not mean that the EU—or the United States—should be silent when abuses of human rights or democratic process occur. The EU has a long history of speaking out in support of democracy, even to close diplomatic partners, and this should not stop. Tangible support for civil society should be provided through the European Endowment for Democracy and other mechanisms, and the EU’s support of election observations should not cease. And clearly, if an EaP country wants to be considered as a future EU or NATO member, it must move decisively to address democratic shortcomings.

Many in the Partnership countries would say that their highest priority is to receive a membership perspective; i.e., to be promised EU membership when they meet the criteria. But this is very unlikely to happen at the Riga Summit. Indeed, one of the failings of the EaP has been to treat these countries as though they are moving toward membership, when that was not the EU’s ambition. By taking the membership perspective for the group off the table, the EU will be free to support a much more variable approach to these countries, focused on their particular situation and the EU interest in boosting stability, prosperity, and good governance. Some of these coun-

BY WORKING WITH EUROPE TO PROVIDE THE EAP COUNTRIES WITH SOME ELEMENTS OF SECURITY AND TO ENSURE THAT THE IMPACT OF TTIP IS POSITIVE, THE UNITED STATES CAN HELP THESE COUNTRIES ACHIEVE A GREATER LEVEL OF PROSPERITY AND SECURITY.

tries should receive a full EU membership perspective, hopefully in the very near future. Those EaP countries that seek to “belong” to Europe immediately should pursue the option of membership in the Energy Union. The EU, by opening Energy Union membership to all Energy Community members and candidates, would contribute significantly to the sense of inclusion and stability in the region.

**A Transatlantic Project**

This effort should not be a totally European undertaking, however. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has played an essential role in integrating Central Europe into the Euro-Atlantic community. It took on a leadership role in making NATO enlargement a reality, and it encouraged EU candidate countries to work diligently at the necessary reforms (while not always being patient about the length of EU processes). Today, the United States should not leave support for the EaP countries solely to the EU and its member states. The EU has a much more significant stake in these countries—thanks to close economic, cultural, and historical ties as well as the impact of immigration, both legal and illegal. But the United States still has a serious interest in the ability of these countries to choose their own future path and to enjoy strong economies and political systems while doing so. The United States should fully support the EU in the efforts listed above, and especially should focus on providing financial assistance for anticorruption and transparency efforts, as well as credit guarantees for those seeking to invest. The close cooperation that has developed between the United States and EU in the Ukraine crisis should be extended to transatlantic management of assistance to all the EaP

countries. In addition, the United States can take two important steps—with its European partners—to bring the EaP countries closer to the transatlantic partnership.

In particular, the United States and Europe should:

**Open discussions with EaP countries about how the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) will affect them and explore the potential for using TTIP to grant the EaP countries market access to both sides of the Atlantic.**

Those EaP countries that have successfully concluded a DCFTA with the European Union will certainly be affected by TTIP, but whether they will achieve access to the US market will depend on the rules-of-origin clauses, and perhaps other regulations. Those EaP countries that do not have a DCFTA in force face a more ambiguous situation. The United States and EU should consult with the EaP countries to determine whether market access would be a benefit for them. Those with a DCFTA already have access to the EU market, and have already started to cope with the free import of EU goods. The impact of access to the US market is likely to be much less in terms of economics, but could be a great boost politically in terms of belonging to the West. For those without a DCFTA, it has been recommended earlier that the EU open its markets anyway, at least for certain key products. The United States should do likewise—either through TTIP or a regular FTA. Again the actual economic impact will be small, as none of the EaP countries has much trade with the US compared to Europe, but the political significance would be much greater. At the same time, such a market access agreement should not conflict with any obligations under the EEU.

**Build on existing security and defense cooperation with some EaP countries to strengthen military-to-military cooperation, interoperability, and joint training, including through NATO and EU operations.**

The United States, through NATO and directly, already has security and defense partnerships with some EaP countries. All the EaP countries are members of NATO's Partnership for Peace, for example, although some, such as Georgia, have been far more active than others. The EaP countries face very diverse and in some cases, very threatening security situations. Without some prospect of security, these governments are unlikely to be able to undertake desired reforms or achieve any lasting stability. They are unlikely to become members of NATO in the near future—and not all want to join the alliance. Thus, the United States and Europe must find alternative means of providing some level of security for these countries, at least those who want to work with the United States and Europe. Perhaps most important is the building of strong military-to-military partnerships,

which create confidence and greater understanding by both parties. Visits by NATO troops, either under Alliance or national commands will also be important. US and European forces should participate in military exercises when invited by EaP countries and also invite those countries to send their troops to NATO and PfP exercises. While all these activities happen occasionally with EaP countries, it needs to be a much more robust and strategic engagement if it is have any significant impact.

The European Union has the first responsibility to manage relations with the EaP countries and create a new form of partnership, as it has the most connections with them and the most at stake. But the United States can play a crucially important role, especially in helping ensure that these countries can feel part of the West. By working with Europe to provide the EaP countries with some elements of security and to ensure that the impact of TTIP is positive, the United States can help these countries achieve a greater level of prosperity and security. By working together to address the challenging situation of the EaP—by building a truly transatlantic partnership for this wider Europe—the United States and EU can help these countries reach a more stable, prosperous, and secure future.

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1030 15th Street, NW,  
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