



SMART GEOSTRATEGY FOR THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

Richard Youngs
and Kateryna Pishchikova



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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20036
P: +1 202 483 7600
F: +1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

Carnegie Europe
Rue du Congres 15
1000 Brussels
Belgium
P: +32 2 735 56 50
F: +32 2 836 62 22
CarnegieEurope.eu

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Kairouan, Tunisia, 20 October 2011

European Union observers Ildiko Kosztołni and Juan Ribó Chalmeta monitor the electoral process in Kairouan city. Following the invitation from the Tunisia interim government, the European Union established an Election Observation Mission to monitor the upcoming elections for a Constituent Assembly scheduled on October 23rd 2011.

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About the Authors

Richard Youngs is a senior associate in the Carnegie Endowment's Democracy and Rule of Law Program. He is also a professor of international relations at Warwick University. Prior to joining Carnegie in July 2013, he was director of the Madrid and Brussels-based think tank FRIDE. He also held positions in the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and as an EU Marie Curie fellow. He was senior fellow at the Transatlantic Academy in Washington DC from 2012 to 2013. His seventh book, *The Uncertain Legacy of Crisis: European Foreign Policy Faces the Future*, will be published in early 2014.

Kateryna Pishchikova is a visiting scholar at the Cornell Institute for European Studies. She is an expert on democratization and democracy promotion, especially in the European neighborhood. She was a junior fellow at the Transatlantic Academy in Washington DC from 2012 to 2013. Her recent book, *Promoting Democracy in Postcommunist Ukraine: The Contradictory Outcomes of U.S. Aid to Women's NGOs*, appeared in 2011.



Summary

The European Union's (EU's) relationship with Eastern Europe and the Caucasus is at a turning point. 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. To rescue its association with its Eastern partners, the EU must deliver more tangible results. Europe can be both geopolitical and committed to reform—but to strike the right balance, the EU must be more strategic.

Challenges Facing the Eastern Partnership

- Russia has threatened trade sanctions, energy supply interruptions, and security reprisals against states choosing to sign new agreements with the EU. The November 28–29 Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, is now partially an exercise to limit the damage done.
- European governments hope to sign a raft of association agreements at the summit that are designed to lock the Eastern partners into a sphere of European influence and ensure progressive political and economic liberalization.
- Concrete results like association agreements are important, but injecting new momentum into the Eastern Partnership will depend primarily on what happens after the summit.
- European governments must move beyond signing formal contractual agreements and recognize that policy should not be primarily about winning the East and beating Russia. It is not in the EU's strategic interest to see these states destabilized by geopolitical rivalry.
- To build a more sustainable strategy, the EU should facilitate the region's internal cohesion and avoid giving Russia any further incentives to deepen tit-for-tat power struggles. Instead, it should reinforce its positive-sum, values-oriented version of geopolitics.

Recommendations for a Positive-Sum Strategy

Focus less on the technical implementation of EU standards and more on underlying political reform. The EU's current approach assumes countries

will be willing to make a huge administrative effort to fit into the EU's template and that will indirectly spur democracy and strategic benefit. Instead, the EU should support and promote democratic standards in a proactive, bottom-up way.

Deliver more tangible benefits faster. Eastern partners that implement reforms should quickly receive benefits from the EU that are tailored to each state.

Use conditionality more consistently and selectively. Incentives should be attached to progress on overcoming core obstacles to democratic and governance reform rather than progress on more tangential administrative hurdles.

Reform the way Eastern Partnership funds are spent. The EU should support civil society organizations in a more agile and participative manner.

Introduction

European Union (EU) policy toward Eastern Europe and the Caucasus is at a watershed moment. On November 28–29, leaders of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries will meet in Vilnius, Lithuania, for a summit that is due to include the signing of a number of new agreements. Yet, in recent months, the EaP almost seems to have been unraveling as Russia’s behavior has become more assertive. Moscow has threatened trade sanctions, energy supply interruptions, and security reprisals against states choosing to sign new agreements with the European Union. This has sown confusion among EU member states and their Eastern partners.

All eyes are on the Vilnius summit. But rescuing the Eastern Partnership will depend primarily on what happens when leaders depart the Lithuanian capital. European governments realize they need to adopt a more strategic approach to the Eastern neighborhood countries of Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Belarus. However, they seem unsure about what being “strategic” actually means in practice or how to regain the initiative from Russia. The EU equivocates over giving thicker substance to its proclaimed positive-sum, values-oriented version of geopolitics.

Successful geopolitics requires the EU not to compete on the same ground as Russia, but rather to deploy its own values-based framework in a more active and tangible fashion.

The EU must maintain momentum after the summit by delivering on the benefits it has promised to EaP countries for making certain reforms. For this, EU policies must move from passive to active mode and consider a whole range of deeply political dynamics beyond the formalistic lens of EU contractual accords.

Successful geopolitics requires the EU not to compete on the same ground as Russia, but rather to deploy its own values-based framework in a more active and tangible fashion.

The Bumpy Road to Vilnius

The six countries that form the Eastern Partnership once seemed like a natural zone of extension for European Union norms and rules. European governments hope the Vilnius summit will consolidate this logic in the signing of a raft of association agreements that are designed to lock the EU’s Eastern partners into a sphere of European influence and ensure progressive political and economic liberalization. The EU’s high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, Catherine Ashton, has promised that the Vilnius summit will “open a new chapter” in the EU’s relations with its Eastern partners.

But the run-up to the summit has been fraught. Recent events seem to have made it a far more defensive exercise in damage limitation.

At present, the tally of prospective accords gives pause for reflection. Georgia and Moldova are ready to initial their association agreements but will not actually sign them at the summit, leaving a residue of uncertainty.

In Georgia, the current government's political use of the judicial system against members of the former administration could raise doubts during the interim between initialing and signing its agreement, as has happened with Ukraine. The government of Bidzina Ivanishvili insists its choice "for Europe" is firm, and a bipartisan accord of March 2013 curtails any tilt away from a Western orientation. Nevertheless, eyebrows were raised when the prime minister pondered aloud whether the Eurasian Union—a Moscow-led plan to incorporate former Soviet republics into a customs union and eventually a broader economic and political union—might be an attractive alternative for Georgia.

Moldova recently suffered political instability and a series of corruption scandals that seem to have contaminated preparations for a deeper partnership with the European Union. With the Communists currently positioned to score strongly in elections in 2014, the country's commitment to its pro-European course after Vilnius may diminish. So, speedy ratification of the association agreement will be desirable to avoid further complications.

Diplomats are confident that the accord with Ukraine will be signed, especially after Kiev's apparent willingness to address EU-stipulated reforms during the fall and its possible agreement to let jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko travel to Germany for medical treatment. At the time of writing, some member states remain undecided on the association agreement, although Russian tactics have shifted the positions of some doubters. But, even if the agreement is signed, the inelegant deal making over Tymoshenko's fate will hardly give the ceremony an air of unbounded success or genuinely warm partnership.

Due to a dearth of either interest or maneuverability, Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are unlikely to make any significant commitments to the EU in Vilnius. In Belarus, the regime of Alexander Lukashenko shows no sign of bending to EU strictures on political prisoners, as sanctions have failed to have the desired effect; it has also been targeted by Russian sanctions in recent months. Russia has pressured Armenia into signing up to the Eurasian Union. Yerevan's decision to join that Moscow-led effort puts greater stress on Azerbaijan to reconsider its relations with Russia, which is now arming both Armenia and Azerbaijan in their conflict over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Moscow is the only interlocutor capable of overseeing a deal on Armenian troop withdrawal from the territory. Despite the defiantly undemocratic reelection of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in October 2013, the EU is rushing to sign a modernization pact with Baku. This will not be binding and is concerned more with pragmatic cooperation than with underlying reforms.

Energy politics have also become more fraught. Companies concluded that the supposedly flagship Nabucco pipeline was commercially unviable, pulling the plug on the initiative. The pipeline, long presented as a key plank of EU energy security, was meant to travel across some EaP countries and reduce European dependence on Russian gas.

This is a sobering picture. In a region that once seemed to be fired with a European vocation, many ponder whether the EU has contrived to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory—or, at least, whether Russia has managed to snatch away the EU’s achievements. These developments raise the prospect that the EU’s postmodern empire is in retreat, more or less defeated on the gangsterish badlands of the Eastern front.

Underlying all this, of course, is the fundamental question of whether the EU is at all able or willing to deal with Russia’s increasingly assertive, zero-sum diplomacy. Even though some in the region suggest that the specter of Russian power is in fact overstated and the EaP’s traction is gaining ground slowly but surely, the question still stands.

One conclusion might be that none of the apparent setbacks really matters greatly to the EU. Implicitly, member states could be making the judgment that the Eastern borderlands are not worth more effort and are of relatively limited importance economically and politically. Eastern European economies are small. If EU member states choose to develop their potentially sizable shale gas resources, they will not need the East’s oil and gas transit routes nearly as much as in the past. The arch-Machiavellian might say: if Russia wants to spend good money pumping in subsidies and taking up the burden of providing security guarantees, let it take the strain.

The problem is that the EU seems to be drifting into this position almost by default. It is true that the Vilnius summit has awoken much interest across Europe. Germany in particular has worked to raise the meeting’s profile. And Sweden, Finland, and the Benelux countries have all intensified their diplomacy in the region. Yet overall, member states engage in less strategic thinking about the EaP than about Russia—and that is still the case even as they have grown warier of a geopolitical partnership with Moscow. In consequence, policy is governed by inertia more than by any precise assessment of where the EU’s strategic interests really lie. Member states undoubtedly say they care about the Eastern dimension; but the EaP effort still has the feel of a lobbying exercise undertaken by a small minority of Central and Eastern European member states. The Southern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy—the EU’s overarching instrument for cooperation with countries to its east and south—is, of course, racked by serious shortcomings and problems. But it does seem to generate more priority interest across the totality of member states in a way that is still to be seen, and that is increasingly necessary, in the EaP.

Policy is governed by inertia more than by any precise assessment of where the EU’s strategic interests really lie.

Rhetorically, the now-standard reply to these disquieting trends is that the EU must act “more strategically” in its neighborhood. Ministers, members of the European Commission, policy documents, businesspeople, and analysts all concur that the EaP needs to be more strategic. In itself, this much-repeated cliché tells us little. The whole question is what strategic means.

Reasserting the EU's Role

Answering that question requires getting back to the fundamentals. At base, the EaP suffers from an apparent ambiguity: it is not clear whether it is a tool for regional geopolitics or a framework for motivating reforms in individual states. Advocates of a more “geopolitical” approach generally seem to have in mind a strategy that builds economic- and security-oriented alliances, confronts Russia, and minimizes issues of domestic-political values. Critics charge the EU with having stranded itself in an ineffectual halfway house, firmly pursuing neither the reform nor the geopolitical option but rather a messy and weak mix of the two. Many now say the EU must choose more unequivocally between the routes: geopolitics or values convergence.

But this presents a false dichotomy. The EU can best be strategic precisely by offering an alternative to Russian forms of power projection. But it must do this in a more ends-oriented and targeted fashion.

A great deal of debate about the EaP is about the region apparently being forced into a choice between the EU and Russia. The EU insists it seeks to avoid obliging its Eastern partners to make a zero-sum choice between Moscow and Brussels—a sensible lens through which to define geopolitics. And the EU says

formally it rejects Russia’s *realpolitik* approach. But it has not done enough to put meat on the bones of its professed positive-sum approach or to support transformations in the East that benefit both the EU and EaP countries.

Indeed, it shows signs of being tempted at least a few steps along the path of mutually exclusive binary strategic choice. One expert fears that the EU has already turned the EaP into a mechanism for “keeping EaP partners away from Russia.”¹ While the North Atlantic Treaty

Organization’s Steadfast Jazz exercises—part of the alliance’s efforts to maintain interoperable and combat-ready forces—were planned a long time ago, they took place a few weeks before the Vilnius summit. Such timing made it easier for Russia to complain about the West’s “Cold War attitude” in the run-up to the summit.

The EU presents the core divide between its own approach and Russia’s as deriving from the technical incompatibility between the Eurasian Union and the deep and comprehensive free-trade areas on offer with the European Union. The Eurasian Union would involve tariff schedules and controls on

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economic policy that would cut across EU free-trade requirements. The removal of nontariff barriers under EU agreements would sit uneasily with the Eurasian Union.

European leaders constantly reassure Eastern leaders that the deep and comprehensive free-trade agreements will not act to the detriment of EaP states' relations with Russia. But this is not how it appears to many in those partner countries. In Moldova, a recurrent suggestion is that the EU needs to work hard to be fully inclusive of the Russian-speaking minority in its cooperation programs. The Ukrainian government has raised the prospect of free trade with, rather than membership in, the Moscow-led customs union, with trade liberalization serving as a bridge between the two integration schemes. This seems to be the Belarusian leader's thinking too. And because the EU only has formal contact with the opposition in Belarus, it is bereft of influence to mold a nondivisive identity for the country.

In mitigation of this, European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy Štefan Füle insists that the EU will work toward a broader framework of economic cooperation and possible free-trade principles that EaP states with deep and comprehensive free-trade agreements could apply with members of the Eurasian Union. Füle has sent astute signals that the EU and Russia can work toward a broader free-trade area and regulatory cooperation that would guarantee Eastern partners a notable rapprochement with the Eurasian Union. Of course, this best-case scenario is a very long way off: the Eurasian Union is still not actually operating, and it is likely to take many years before it converges on World Trade Organization compatibility, which would also align it with EU rules.

In reality, the essential question is not one of technical trade regimes. While the EU's intimations of economic cooperation represent welcome overtures, the essentially political logic behind Russian tactics needs to be addressed.

The Russian-led customs union is economically costly for Eastern states, as the external tariff is set to be high and thus to choke off these economies from much-needed trade. Lukashenko has made a number of negative statements about the benefits of the proposed Eurasian Union, saying he might want to present Russia with the "integration bill." Armenia will not get much from joining the Eurasian customs union in a purely economic sense. Political dynamics lie squarely behind the project and recent decisions.²

Füle himself has made it clear that the issue is a political matter of EaP states' sovereignty—that is, their scope for nationally independent decisions. While Russian strategy circumscribes this, the EU commits itself to shoring up Eastern European national free choice.

Arguably, the greatest risk is not so much Russian strength but how Moscow might react to EaP states choosing against it; if Russia turns to even more

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prickly, wounded, nationalist confrontation, this would hardly be beneficial to either the EU or its Eastern partners. Such confrontation has the potential to foment conflict in a number of “hot spots” in the region. The EU has struggled to engage in these areas and to develop any effective role in conflict prevention.

There is no need for the EU to be overly defensive or to be panicked into an ineffectual and self-delegitimizing parody of Russian *realpolitik*. It is true that EU aid cannot compete with the sums of money at stake in the Russian manipulation of gas prices. But in some senses, Russia’s bullying denotes its failure to provide an alternative model of influence based on a more positive mode of attraction. Reasserting the EU’s role is not simply about defeating Russia on its own terms.

Indeed, the Eurasian Union remains vague and ill-defined in terms of institutional process and economic vision. At the level of rules-based, low-politics integration, it is no rival to the European Union. Moreover, the Eurasian Union will always remain driven and dominated by Russia, not based on an integration process that offers an equal footing to its other members. After the initial shock of Armenia’s decision to join the Moscow-led bloc, EU member states have moved to a view that Russia has overshot its assertive tactics in Ukraine and Moldova.

While there appears to be a growing diversity in the East itself, all partner states remain nervous about overdependence on Russia. Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova have all made a point of responding robustly to the latest bout of Russian bullying. Some states remain ambivalent. But others, like Georgia and Moldova, are clear that they have made an unequivocal choice for a European vocation and will not be dissuaded by Russian strong-arm tactics. They want more support from the EU in resisting Russian reprisals.

Because of this, the EU can and should take the longer view—and this is the essential means to upgrade its influence in the region. After the Vilnius summit, the EU will need to work hard to inject greater substance into its positive-sum philosophy and demonstrate exactly how it can enable the EaP to move into a higher gear. Eastern partners would generally welcome a more effective EU positive-sum logic that would help Russia past its neuralgic imperial hangover. Presenting the Vilnius summit as a make-or-break, final opportunity for EaP countries to choose East or West may be counterproductive because it breeds anxiety among Eastern states and forces them to look more seriously at Russian offers. In a sense, the EU needs to rejoin its EaP policy to its Russia policy.³ All EaP states wish to avoid having to make a purely binary choice—even only because they simply cannot afford to pay an expensive price for choosing a European orientation.

The Ailments

An overarching reason for the EaP's shortfalls is that since the inception of the European Neighborhood Policy and later the Eastern Partnership, the EU's approach has been overly technocratic. It is based on gradual rules convergence between the EU and its neighboring countries, with the long-term goal of "sharing everything . . . but institutions."⁴ Yet, this approach has proven to be overly bureaucratic. It gives little space for engagement with different constituencies in the EaP countries. Action plans and agreements are all directed at a distant future, delivering few tangible benefits in the short or medium term.

The fault stems from the fact that the policy was created to manufacture a substitute for the EU's enlargement policy. Little strategic thinking went into determining what the EU really wanted to achieve in the East. The policy did not envisage the EU having to be very proactive, as it was based on an assumption that the EU's power of attraction would ensure success.

This approach has clearly delivered much less than it could or should have. The basic dilemma is that the EU cannot continue to run policy in its neighborhood as something qualitatively different from its broader foreign policies. Currently, the EaP seeks to operate more by extending EU policy competences outward than by employing traditional diplomacy and geostrategy. The EU needs to be more political in the way it pursues its proclaimed long-term objectives.

One group of researchers points out that the EU still has remarkably few people covering the very political multilateral, diplomatic dimensions of the EaP compared with the size of its teams that oversee technical or development projects.⁵ In particular, a tighter linkage can be made between the association agreements and more proactive conflict resolution in respect of the region's protracted conflicts; observers concur this is an area where the tepidness of EU diplomacy has weakened its overarching strategic weight. An example of an area where improvement is needed is the EU's border-monitoring mission in Georgia. The mission was just extended, under new leadership, and the post-Vilnius agenda must focus on achieving something more than a largely symbolic security presence.

EU diplomats insist the EaP has become more strategic in an effort to address more geopolitical imperatives. Dialogues that are held every six months have been used to coordinate positions with Eastern partners on foreign policy questions. In its association agreement with Ukraine, the EU has included language that is oriented toward security support as a means of meeting Russian pressure. Sweden and Poland have sought to generate more security-related coordination with Eastern partners. The EU's promise to open the European market fully to compensate for Russian sanctions on Moldovan wine is a good example of smart strategic use of EU civilian power. All these are welcome steps, as some degree of response to Russia is often apposite. Yet, much more will be needed in the vanguard of post-Vilnius plans. For instance, the European External

Action Service, the EU's foreign policy arm, is planning a new communication on ideas to incorporate a security dimension into the EaP, something so far conspicuously absent.

The European Neighborhood Policy has not been tightly dovetailed with national European foreign policies. The technocratic aspects of the EaP cannot be a substitute for national geostrategy. The geopolitical context is too fragile today for its almost-apolitical approach to gain traction. Russian leaders invest considerable effort in visiting the region. Several European leaders have begun traveling there more often—not only Füle and Ashton, but also Polish, Swedish, and Baltic ministers. Notwithstanding this, many in the region still have the impression that member states accord the Eastern neighborhood a far lower priority than does Moscow. European leaders should not feel pressured to emulate Russia's "sphere of influence" philosophy, but they should match its level of high-politics diplomatic engagement.

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Domestic Barriers to Reform

Beyond the EU's focus on technocratic approaches and countering Russia, political problems in the Eastern states themselves hinder progress. Many of the EU's strategic problems in the region emanate from the way that malign structures of governance seem to have dug into Eastern Europe's political bedrock. Governance pathologies are both a cause of EU difficulties in the region and also (partly) the effect of its policy shortcomings.

The 2013 EaP Integration Index, which records the EaP countries' progress in converging with EU norms, uncovers a mismatch between partners' incremental administrative and managerial alignment with the EU on the one hand and the increasingly acute high-politics impediments to reform, such as corruption and political interference in the judiciary, on the other.⁶ Remedying this requires the EU to have a far deeper and more political understanding of the current structural dynamics that sustain EaP regimes. So far, domestic governance problems and structural barriers to reform in the Eastern countries have been relatively low priorities in the debates on the future of the EaP—which have homed in increasingly on "the Russia factor."

Discussion of the EaP needs to move beyond the Moscow factor. Russian pressure on Eastern partners may be fierce; but it often gains more traction when filtered through dysfunctional kleptocracies. The lack of success with further Europeanization is as much about domestic power struggles and entrenched illiberalism as about geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the EU. Russian foreign policy represents an important factor in the whole of the EaP; yet the question of whether these countries would be prosperous and

democratic in the absence of Russian interference cannot be answered with a resounding “yes.”

If the EaP is to deliver on its ambition of being a framework for motivating reforms, it has to improve on its analysis of domestic political dynamics and barriers to reform—and integrate this analysis into its policy. Stagnant reform dynamics in Eastern European countries have entrenched illiberal tendencies that are increasingly difficult to dislodge. Recognizing and finding ways to counter this atrophy should be the first important step toward a more effective EaP policy.

The costs of Eastern countries’ protracted, halfhearted transitions are immense—and the EU underestimates them at its peril. Low levels of commitment to serious reform by almost all post-Soviet governments has dramatically weakened state capacity, raised the price of modernization, and increased dependence on costly subsidies. Corruption, even if variable across the six EaP states, remains a pervasive feature that further discredits citizens’ trust in institutions and eats into their belief in positive change. Citizens are increasingly disillusioned and demobilized. For instance, the inability of the Ukrainian opposition and civic movements to stage any credible protest action over the past two years is striking in a country whose Orange Revolution made stirring global headlines in 2004. And the lack of public reaction to Armenia’s choice to join the customs union with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan is sobering. Networks of patronage continue to dominate these countries’ politics, and instances of more competitive politics result from the struggle between different power distribution networks not from gradual democratization.

Strengthening institutions, helping to rebuild accountability mechanisms between citizens and elites, and empowering citizens through education, dialogue, and exchange—all these steps are needed to overcome governance pathologies and barriers to comprehensive reform.

Although the six EaP countries share most of these malign dynamics, each country is unique. This presents a daunting challenge for the EU. While its long-term strategies and goals are relevant for all six countries—and, indeed, for Russia as well—the EU’s short- to medium-term engagement with these states has to be much more tailor-made for each individual country than is currently the case.

The reform dynamic will naturally pull EaP states toward the European Union, not signing association agreements per se; those accords are one possible means of achieving that goal, not an end in themselves. The EU should focus on fostering a smoother and more consistent reform dynamic through its Eastern policies regardless of the association agreements. Had this approach been at the core of its policies from the start, the

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EU would have prevented these policies from looking to some like “with us or against us” tools in a geopolitical battle with Russia.

As and when association agreements are signed, they should not be seen as geopolitical trophies that are then left to gather dust. They must serve as more active tools for inclusive reform. Signing the new agreements in Vilnius is a beginning more than an end. Simply signing the accords will not suffice to tie Ukraine, Georgia, or Moldova into the EU’s orbit and keep them out of Russia’s.

The Vilnius summit should also mark a new beginning for those partners that do not sign agreements. For these countries, the EU must find ways to support better governance that do not depend so deeply on its consolidated body of legislation, but rather reflect more political types of engagement. If some states in effect choose not to take advantage of the offer of deeper agree-

ments, this is not because the EU has focused too much on values but because of domestic and regional structural barriers. Working on altering some of these dynamics may help change the picture in the long term.

The period following the Vilnius summit will call for upgraded diplomacy, not for the EU to rest on its laurels having, inevitably, declared a successful summit.

Being strategic means understanding the political intricacies of the region’s hybrid mix of democracy and autocracy. It categorically does not mean skating over such governance pathologies in the name of government-to-government engagement aimed purely at economic modernization and diplomatic stability. Such an approach misreads the effects of the region’s internal political structures.

The EU’s very comparative advantage over Russia is a focus on long-term reform rather than short-term payoffs. It should make sure this advantage is not purely rhetorical. The period following the Vilnius summit will call for upgraded diplomacy, not for the EU to rest on its laurels having, inevitably, declared a successful summit.

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Value-Based Geostrategy

Against the background of these weaknesses and of the challenging geopolitical context, what should the EU do? The crucial starting point for future EU strategy lies in the region’s domestic politics. The best way for the EU to enhance its positive-sum philosophy is to focus in a more committed, political, and individualized way on helping Eastern countries address their underlying governance weaknesses. This is not a denial of the geopolitical challenge, but rather the best way to temper its most egregious risks.

To this end, the issue at stake is not the absolute choice between signing and not signing agreements—or between a normative and a strategic policy. It is how to utilize the EU’s normative advantage in a strategic way that delivers more tangible results for the Eastern partners themselves and for the EU. This means the time for crucial action will begin after the Vilnius summit. The key

question is how to lock in reform dynamics in EaP states far more successfully than has been the case up to now.

There is something of an unhealthy asymmetry to the current EaP. The partner states are often eager to profess how well they are doing their homework and getting their house in order specifically to meet EU conditions. But politically they attach a less clear significance to this than the EU does. Partner states speak the language of supplicants. Yet the very fact that they have to constantly justify themselves as errant pupils to Brussels is precisely what makes them reluctant to definitively reject Russia's singularly unique form of courtship.

Meanwhile, policymakers acknowledge that the perceived need to respond to Russia has diverted debate away from consideration of nitty-gritty reform tactics. And with Ukraine in particular, the focus has been on finding the legal means for speedy provisional application of technical parts of the association agreement, not on underlying political reform questions.

This strategy rests on too many heroic and airy leaps of faith. The aim to embed Eastern partners within a zone of EU standards remains valid, but it is insufficient simply to hold this out as a desirable prospect and expect a nicely beneficial geopolitics to fit itself into place almost of its own accord.

The EU needs to support and promote democratic standards in a proactive way, rather than assuming that countries will be willing to make a huge administrative effort to fit into the EU's template, which will then indirectly spur democracy and strategic benefit. The EU must move away from reasoning that simply holding out (relatively limited) carrots will pave the way to top-down reform and think more in terms of the bottom-up capacity that will be needed over the long term to sustain processes of political and economic modernization.⁷ Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt puts the challenge well: after the summit, the EU will need to "unlock the potential" of the agreements, and to do so it must "leave its comfort zone" and move beyond what might be called low-level ultra-incrementalism.⁸

One potential solution would be to offer the carrot of a membership prospect to partners more directly. But there is no sign that will happen in Vilnius or soon after. Key member states have resisted the geopolitical case for extending enlargement for several years and now, in the midst of economic crisis, seem even more unmovable. Tangible support must be found on a different metric.

The EU must do three things: deliver quicker and more solid benefits to Eastern partners; streamline its use of conditionality; and improve its interaction with Eastern civil society.

Delivering Benefits

Association agreements need to generate more tangible benefits faster. This suggestion has been repeated for some time and is a need that diplomats acknowledge. Yet bureaucratic inertia is still allowed to predominate. In particular, delays in visa liberalization have stirred up much frustration with the

EU in Moldova, compounding the domestic factors that have left that country's European orientation less absolute than it appeared at the beginning of 2013. And regarding Ukraine, a report by the British embassy in Kiev speaks of the "vacuum" that has been created by the lack of specific information about its association agreement. This void has been exploited by advocates of the customs union, who are better able to highlight that initiative's benefits with specific facts and examples.⁹

Visa liberalization is the most influential carrot and the measure now frequently alluded to as likeliest to reverse the EaP's faltering momentum. But it will not be sufficient. There are a number of sectors in which legal scope exists for the EU to front-load the benefits it offers to Eastern partners in a way that provides targeted solidarity against likely post-Vilnius Russian restrictions.¹⁰ Better outreach and public diplomacy will be required to enhance support for the EU option, as at present Eastern populations remain largely ignorant of what the confusing array of association agreements and deep and comprehensive free-trade agreements really offers.

Streamlining Conditionality

The EU should make the conditions it applies to agreements simultaneously more selective and more methodical. Currently, agreements are tied to improvement across the whole panoply of EU rules and regulations. Selectivity exists, but in the sense that governments can choose which technical areas of cooperation to incorporate first, not in terms of focusing on the most essential reform obstacles. The EU should rather concentrate on applying conditions to improvements on a smaller number of core democratic standards.

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It is a huge task for Eastern states to meet current conditions. Russian President Vladimir Putin had a point when, referring to Ukraine's association with the EU, he mischievously suggested that EU standards—and some of the eleven benchmarks the EU set in December 2012—would

be extremely onerous for Ukrainian businesses. Moldova has been obliged to fulfill hundreds of administratively heavy and intrusive legislative preconditions to sign its association agreement. Meanwhile, despite Azerbaijan making it clear that it is not interested in shared values at all, in August the European Investment Bank rewarded the country with a program of loans. This asymmetry also points to the need for the EaP to balance its coverage of the different partners: while Ukraine is of course the big geopolitical prize and the likely swing state in the region, the EU may be neglecting areas of potential impact in other partners.

Conditions are also applied inconsistently, and rewards are at times provided when conditions have not been fully satisfied. Sectors of Ukrainian

business complain that they have adopted some EU standards of their own volition and with much cost, but that the access to European markets this regulatory convergence is supposed to bring about remains a distant prospect. At the same time, a common perception among the Ukrainian elite is that the EU is desperately keen to sign an association agreement with Kiev in Vilnius but is then likely to be extremely flexible on pushing for further reforms, giving the government scope for pushing back the timeline of conditionality requirements. The EU must prove these perceptions wrong after the Vilnius summit.

Far-reaching incentives could make a difference if attached to core democratic standards. The EU has promised speedy provisional application of association agreement benefits, mindful of Russian trade and financial threats to Ukraine. Brussels will need to mold this process in a way that feeds into domestic reform dynamics; sending Tymoshenko to Germany does nothing in itself for the quality of Ukrainian democracy. The EU might also raise its level of ambition beyond the deep and comprehensive free-trade agreements to envisage some kind of common economic area for the Eastern partners akin to the European Free Trade Association between Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland.

Improving Interactions With Civil Society

The EU should rethink how it spends its funds in the civic sphere. Cooperation programs have become laudably broad but are relatively untargeted. So many new “platforms” of cooperation have been added to the EaP, covering areas run by different European Commission departments, that it has proven difficult to harness these initiatives in a geopolitical way.

The European Neighborhood Policy budget is frozen for 2014–2020, and the finite resources the EU has need to be focused toward the highest-priority goals. The EU needs to fine-tune the way in which it spends its large quantities of budget support aid—as it is now trying to do in Africa and the Middle East, after concluding that much of such direct funding undermines democratic reforms.

Civil society also needs to be involved at an earlier stage of policy design. The EU tends to treat EaP states as passive recipients of precooked packages: they either sign up to what the EU has drafted or not. The views of reform constituencies in these countries need to be taken on board during the elaboration of policy guidelines, in terms of how funds are spent, priorities are set, and benchmarks are established.

The EU has made some progress. The Neighborhood Civil Society Facility—which, as part of the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument, financially supports projects relevant to the EU’s neighborhood policies—and nonstate actor funding lines have given EU aid a more locally nuanced, grass-roots profile. Aid to Belarusian civil society has increased significantly since the middle of 2012.

Yet, much scope exists to boost the EaP's civil society dimension. The EaP's Civil Society Forum, which brings together various civil society organizations to develop recommendations for the EU and national governments, recognizes the need to now harness the impressively broad network it has established in a more operational direction.¹¹ For instance, leaders of the forum speak of the need for more active monitoring of the implementation of association agreement reforms after Vilnius.¹² Twinning programs, which involve posting EU officials and experts to counterpart ministries and organizations in the region, have had much positive impact. But they do not suffice while profoundly political obstacles to deep democracy remain. And the new Eastern Partnership Integration and Cooperation program, established in 2012 to channel reform rewards according to the more-for-more principle (the more states reform, they more support they receive), focuses primarily on big infrastructure projects, which is not the most effective approach. Instead, it should focus its limited resources on more core political governance issues.

Large amounts of aid forwarded under the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument remain overwhelmingly state-centered and need to be more organically connected to civil and political society dynamics. In a similar vein, the EU's Comprehensive Institution Building program, designed to help partner countries strengthen their institutional capacities to implement the association agreements, is sizable and of enormous importance to the EaP. But it has been concerned mainly with state capacities and is only just beginning, at a low level, to work on improving the interaction between ministries, parliaments, and civil society.

By far the major share of EU rule-of-law funds still goes to government bodies for formal institutional projects. The EU tends to think of the rule of law in terms of partners' capacities to transpose EU legislation as and when they make commitments under the association agreements. It needs to support more initiatives geared toward bottom-up civic legal education and legal aid—efforts that are just beginning to come on stream.

To make these shifts, innovative thinking is needed. The first grant of the European Endowment for Democracy, which assists prodemocratic civil society organizations, went to an independent Azeri media outlet. Much more should be done through this kind of initiative. The Polish government in particular has pushed for a stronger focus on innovative projects funded by the endowment in EaP states.

EU undertakings could also target the business community. The EU is the main trading partner for all EaP countries except Belarus, so deeper engagement with the region's business sectors could offer important benefits. Key economic actors should see the prospect of concrete gains in business opportunities in European markets, and they should realize that this is an incentive for them to disengage from the damaging politics of state capture.

Georgia illustrates some of the salient features of European democracy support. There, the EU has worked to reform and align formal institutional and state structures; it has pressed both sides of the country's political divide to desist from self-interested use of the judicial system. But the EU also needs to assist more actively with fostering a liberal civic ethos, which is still so patently limited. Between 2004 and 2012, European funds flowed to supporters of President Mikheil Saakashvili in the government sector, to the detriment of civil society. Now the EU is correcting this imbalance and pumping more support into civil society. Still, support for reform is not particularly high. Just over €1 million (\$1.4 million) a year is forthcoming from the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights for soft rights issues like consumer rights, prisoner rehabilitation, data protection, and disabled rights—all important priorities, but removed from core political problems. The Instrument for Stability also funded some small election-monitoring initiatives in 2012. While Georgia's October 2013 presidential elections were fair and brought a handover of power to new president Giorgi Margvelashvili, much more effort will be required to improve the underlying quality of democratic process.

There is also more that can be done at the member-state level. Member-state development and technical aid to all EaP countries is relatively limited. While they usefully provide technical assistance to back up the European Commission's budget support, member-state governments are concerned that funds are being misused and that absorption capacities are limited in parts of the region. The Polish and Swedish governments fund slightly more political projects than others, but the projects are of a small magnitude. The Dutch have just reincluded Georgia in their human rights fund at the level of about €300,000–400,000 (\$410,000–550,000) a year. The German development agency is active but in a relatively apolitical fashion. In several countries, money from the U.S. Agency for International Development specifically earmarked for political reform exceeds the amount allocated by most European governments—on Europe's very doorstep.

In his speech to the European Parliament in July 2013, Füle made a welcome commitment to more proactive civil society support. He indicated that a new stress on more flexible and informal civil society dialogues, especially with new youth actors, would be core to the post-Vilnius work program. The challenge will be to update the way that civil society support is delivered.

After the Vilnius summit, the EU must not let its worthy civil society and capacity-building initiatives move along their own, almost-apolitical track. Rather, it must throw the weight of its political tools, diplomacy, and strategic analysis into making sure these programs are not sabotaged or neutralized—as increasingly they have been. Regimes' tighter restrictions on external funding

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must be tempered by more engaged diplomacy, more transparency, and more agile preemption in forming civil society partnerships.

Conclusion

Being strategic is not a matter of simply signing formal contractual agreements as quickly as possible on the grounds that this will suffice to bind EaP countries to the EU. Smart geostrategy is not about winning the East and beating Russia but about facilitating the region's internal cohesion. It cannot be in the EU's strategic interest to see these states fragment in polarized tumult.

It is understandable that the EU wants concrete deliverables from the Vilnius summit in the form of association agreements. European Commissioner Füle says the summit will be a game changer. But it will not be so while debate is limited to the question of how many association agreements will be signed or initiated.

The EU still needs to resolve some fundamental ambiguities over what the Eastern Partnership is really designed to achieve. Until these are addressed, the signing of agreements and work programs will be woefully insufficient for an Eastern strategy.

Europe can be both geopolitical and committed to reforms—but to combine these two strands effectively, the EU needs to design a more strategic use of its support for reforms in the East. To this end, it must avoid both heavy technical conditionality and engagement based on pure *realpolitik* and modernization assumptions. Both these extremes are questionable in terms of the efficacy of reforms and the EU's own strategic interests. And the EU must focus more subtly on the political essence of different regimes. By doing so, it will help to more effectively dislodge the principal barriers to reform in each EaP state.

Better geostrategy in the East is not a matter of the EU mimicking Russia but delivering in more tangible ways on its own tenets. Many will feel that the positive-sum approach looks too idealistic in light of current Russian actions. It will undoubtedly involve an uphill struggle. But to build a more sustainable power balance, the EU should not to give Russia any further incentives to delve deeper into tit-for-tat power struggles.

Developing an effective strategy for Europe's East is one of the EU's most defining geopolitical dilemmas. Whatever happens in Vilnius, the EU will need to show it can effectively rebut Russia's putsch without descending to the same level of visceral Hobbesianism.

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Notes

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