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There Goes the Eastern Neighborhood

By Peter Rutland

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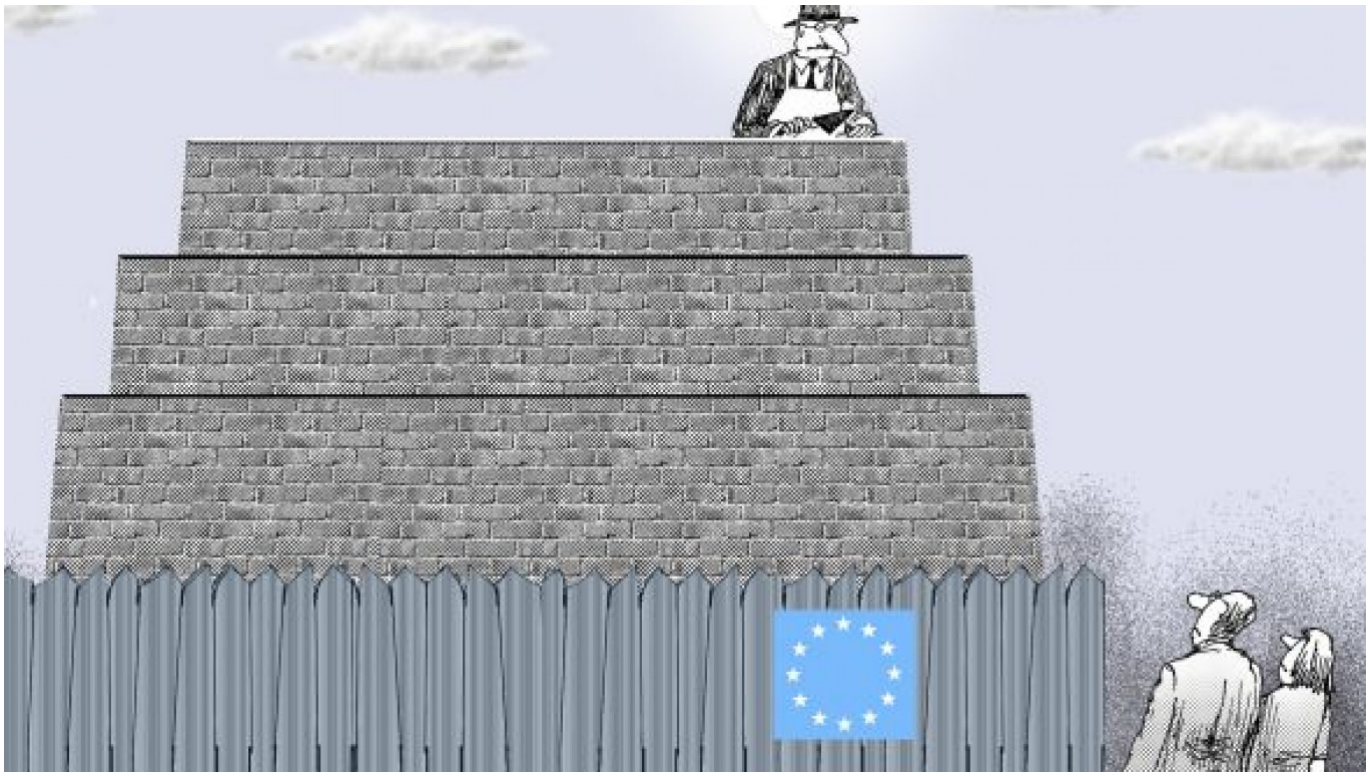

With the Group of Eight leaders pledging $20 billion in aid last week to support countries making the transition from dictatorship in the Arab world, the West seems to be losing its interest in promoting democracy in the former Soviet Union.

On May 25, Catherine Ashton, the European Union's high commissioner for foreign affairs and security, released a review of the European Neighborhood Policy that was initiated in 2003. The report is in part a response to the challenge of the Arab Spring, because the European Neighborhood Policy includes 10 Mediterranean countries as well as the nations participating in the Eastern Partnership — Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

The report was anxiously awaited by pro-EU activists in Eastern Europe. As U.S. interest in the region continues to decline, the EU is left as the main anchor for future progress toward democracy. Other post-socialist countries were offered entry to the EU to stimulate their reform efforts, and that carrot is still on offer for the Western Balkan nations. But the best that the remaining post-Soviet nations can hope for is "association status" with the EU at some point down the road. That vague prospect will not be enough to reverse the retreat from

democracy that has been under way since the euphoria following the color revolutions of the mid-2000s. (None of the Eastern Partnership states has improved its Freedom House ranking since 2006, and two — Armenia and Georgia — have actually declined.)

Given the extensive consultations with experts and stakeholders from the region, the new report is less ambitious than it might have been. Its title, "A New Response to a Changing Neighborhood," recognizes the need for a fresh approach, but the contents fail to provide much assurance to pro-European forces in the east. The main novelty is the pledge to increase aid and tie payments to benchmarks in economic and political reform on a case-by-case basis — that is, more money for more reform and, presumably, less money for less reform.

But the report is unclear on the mechanisms for enforcing conditionality, leaving skeptics to believe that realpolitik will continue to shape Brussels' policy toward strategically important countries such as oil-rich Azerbaijan. The report also pledges to seek partnership with civil society actors, through the creation of a European Endowment for Democracy, and offers an intensified dialogue over visa liberalization. These initiatives reflect dissatisfaction at the past pattern of working closely with the region's incumbent, often corrupt elites.

In a recent paper for the European Council on Foreign Relations, senior policy fellows Andrew Wilson and Nicu Popescu proposed stepping up measures to bring some benefits of EU partnership to ordinary citizens, such as air travel liberalization, caps on roaming charges and even smoking bans. But there is little chance of any progress toward more substantial concessions such as free trade. The one area where EU interests are directly affected by the limbo of their Eastern neighbors is migration. With the Schengen visa-free zone currently challenged by a flood of refugees from North Africa, Brussels urgently needs to maintain secure borders to the east.

The Eastern Partnership nations are uncomfortable with the fact that the European Neighborhood Policy lumps them in with 10 distant and disparate countries of the southern Mediterranean, including Syria and what the EU report refers to as the "Occupied Palestinian Territories." The East Europeans fear — with reason — that their needs are being drowned out by the more dramatic challenges facing the Arab world. Additional funding of 1.24 billion euros ($1.78 billion) will raise EU spending for the European Neighborhood Policy to 7 billion euros ($10 billion) for 2011-13, but two-thirds of the money will go to the Mediterranean countries.

There are many reasons to be skeptical about the European Union's capacity to project its "soft power" into its eastern neighborhood, with a new focus on stabilization rather than value promotion policies. The Lisbon Treaty failed to produce the more unified foreign policy that reformers had hoped to see, and coordination of member-state policies with Brussels remains a major problem. The ongoing crisis in the euro zone leaves little space for pondering the fate of countries beyond the EU's borders.

Economic stagnation in Ukraine and the Caucasus contrasts with Russia's aggressive energy diplomacy, leading some to conclude that Brussels may slip back into a "Russia-first" policy toward the East. For a country like Ukraine, a free trade agreement with the EU represents a more attractive alternative to the customs union with Russia, which Moscow is heavily promoting.

If the EU wants to seriously influence political and economic progress in the former Soviet Union, it will have to come up with a new strategy. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that there is the political will in Brussels or the member nations to rise to the challenge. After all, the eastern neighbors are just neighbors, not family. As Robert Frost once wrote, "Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out — and to whom I was like to give offense."

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