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EU Urges Russia to Respect Eastern Partnership

By The Moscow Times

October 08, 2013



The European Union's ambassador to Russia has urged Moscow to "respect" the wishes of former Soviet states to develop closer ties with the European Union, calling Russian trade sanctions against its neighbors unacceptable.

The comments by Vygaudas Ušackas, the EU ambassador and a former Lithuanian foreign minister, were published a day after Russia suspended all dairy imports from Lithuania. The sanction is widely seen as the latest in a series of attempts to dissuade former Soviet states from seeking trade ties with Europe.

The Eastern Partnership between former Soviet states and the EU aims at "integrating the economies from Lisbon to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky," Ušackas said in an interview with Kommersant published Tuesday. "This is why the countries of the Eastern Partnership have chosen closer political association with the EU, along with fully entering the common European market."

"This is their choice, and we respect it. We expect Russia to respect it as well," Ušackas said.

He called Russia's trade sanctions "unacceptable," but tried to downplay comments by Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius, who said last week that his country could "theoretically" block Russia's road and rail access to the Russian exclave Kaliningrad, which shares a border with Lithuania, if Moscow continues pressuring its neighbors.

The foreign minister "only said that Lithuania could do it, but stressed that it wasn't going to do that," Ušackas said.

Ušackas added that alliance with Europe would help modernize Eastern Partnership countries and benefit Russian businesses at the same time. "The EU and Ukraine won't be the only winners, joining the market would also appeal to the interests of Russian businessmen," he said.

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