

EU Remains Committed to Free Trade Deal With Ukraine, Draft Shows

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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European Union flags flutter outside the EU Commission headquarters in Brussels.

BRUSSELS — The European Union will implement a free-trade pact with Ukraine from next year despite Russian pressure for another delay, according to a draft statement prepared for a summit with six of the bloc's eastern neighbors this month in Riga.

The joint declaration, which is likely to antagonize Moscow, commits to the deal from Jan. 1, 2016, a date already a year later than planned as Russia seeks to oppose European efforts to integrate Ukraine and move it out of Moscow's sphere of orbit.

Russia is pushing for the deal to be postponed by at least another year, according to a Ukrainian official, but the EU is insisting there can be no further delay.

Although the EU is willing to discuss Russian concerns, implementation "will be a top priority of the EU and the partners concerned for the coming years," the draft said.

The deal is at the heart of tensions that have grown from a tug-of-war over influence in Kiev to sanctions, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, and concern among some in the West about a new Cold War.

But aside from the EU's show of support for Ukraine, the May 21-22 Eastern Partnership summit will offer little for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova, according to the draft, as EU governments lower their ambitions for fear of further provoking the Kremlin.

Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine signed association agreements with the European Union last year and want to join the European Union. But the draft made no mention of their aspirations.

Instead, it said that neither Georgia nor Ukraine will immediately be granted visa-free travel to the European Union, as Tbilisi and Kiev had hoped, and that they need reforms to be able to enjoy the kind of treatment Moldova has obtained.

The tepid tone was far from the ambitions of the last Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in 2013, where the European Union sought to encourage a historic shift away from Russia by the six former Soviet republics.

Brussels now appears to accept that Armenia has chosen to side with Moscow after the country decided in 2013 to join a customs union led by Russia, its former Soviet master and its biggest foreign investor. "It is for the EU and its sovereign partners to decide on how they want to proceed with their bilateral relations," the draft said.

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