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EU Can Win the Battle for Its Eastern Neighbors

By Vladislav Inozemtsev

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The Eastern Partnership summit began in Riga yesterday. It brings together six former Soviet republics that are striving, in various degrees, to cooperate with the European Union.

This is the second such summit, and it is not expected to produce the same drama or fateful results as the first did in Vilnius in November 2013, when former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych made the worst choice of his life — one that led to his eventual ouster and to the current confrontation between Russia and the West.

However, this presents a good occasion to think seriously about the long-term orientation and direction of the European Neighborhood Policy.

It is clear that Europe and Russia are now unwilling to compromise over their joint "near abroad." Moscow holds no formal veto power over a single member state in the Eastern Partnership program, with the possible exception of Belarus, which has pledged itself to forming a unified state with Russia.

The European Union also faces no formal restrictions to incorporating new members, as long as they respect EU norms and values as spelled out in Article 49 of the Lisbon Treaty. As a result, all of the westernmost former Soviet republics will eventually become part of a larger Europe. The only questions are: When will it happen? At what price? What consequences will follow?

In this context, if two points were declared at the upcoming summit, they would send an important signal to Eastern Partnership states as well as to Russia.

First, the EU should clearly state that each member of the Eastern Partnership is a potential member of the European Union. Brussels launched that program without adequate preparation and used it as a palliative measure designed more to delay the entry of new EU member states than to expedite it.

The Europeans did not expect such a harsh reaction from Russia, but they definitely bear much of the responsibility for the recent events in Eastern Europe. In effect, the Eastern Partnership program set in motion a chain reaction that the EU cannot and should not stop — primarily because the composition of that strange political bloc gives Europeans great freedom to maneuver.

The Eastern Partnership program is currently focusing on Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. Moldova is moving forward and has received visa-free status with the EU.

Both Georgia and Ukraine hope to receive the same. Of course, cooperation with Ukraine might proceed at the slowest pace, but most important under the current circumstances is not to stop the process — and considering the different sizes of the participating states, that is not such a difficult task.

For example, Moldova, with a population of 3.5 million and a gross domestic product of $11.5 billion — 0.55 percent and 0.07 percent of the European Union's population and GDP respectively — could receive candidate status in the near future and formally accede to the EU as early as 2020-22.

That act would have nothing more than symbolic significance: it will present only a marginal expense for Europe and almost one-third of Moldova's adult population has already relocated in recent years to EU states anyway.

In one or two years, Georgia could receive candidate status and a visa-free regime: it has firm control over its borders, especially its borders with Russia and the separatist regions. Georgia is geographically not a part of Europe, and so its accession to the EU is somewhat debatable, although Tbilisi is perfectly capable of demonstrating that the country is moving toward European standards and norms.

If Ukraine implements the necessary reforms, it could also receive guarantees that its accession to the EU is both possible and desirable. Thus, by integrating Moldova at minimal cost and issuing formal promises to Georgia and Ukraine, the European Union could shift public opinion among Eastern European countries in its favor and strengthen pro-European sentiment in Belarus and Armenia.

Second, the EU could state clearly and unambiguously that it is abandoning its policy of refusing to discuss candidate status for any country plagued by internal conflicts. In fact, with the exception of Belarus, every Eastern Partnership country is struggling with separatist movements.

In the case of Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, Moscow is clearly inspiring and supporting those movements, and only for that reason has it proven impossible to resolve them. But by rescinding its current policy, the EU would remove the incentive for Moscow to interfere and would thereby make a major contribution to establishing peace among the former Soviet republics.

Although Moscow routinely claims that nothing can change the mood of the freedom-loving citizens of the self-proclaimed republic of Transdnestr and the Donbass, some facts call that into doubt.

For example, within one year of Moldova reaching agreement with the EU for a visa-free regime, 74,000 residents of Transdnestr — or one-fourth of that self-proclaimed republic's population — applied for and received Moldovan passports. And if Moldova's chances of joining the EU solidify, Transdnestr might abandon its claims of "independence" overnight.

In the same way, it is unlikely that residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will take so much pride in their Russian passports if Georgia manages to secure a visa-free regime with the EU. Throughout the post-Soviet period, the Kremlin has used "managed instability" in neighboring countries as a means of ensuring that they do not leave Russia's sphere of influence — and that goal has spurred Moscow to maintain the potential for internal conflicts there.

If the EU were to announce its readiness to discuss accession even with countries where internal conflicts continue, it would prove the best tool for their gradual elimination.

Of course, the European Union might not feel ready to undertake this extremely ambitious and difficult plan. But it is worth remembering that, in global politics, ideas and promises often carry as much, and sometimes even more weight than actions.

Europe is already providing large-scale assistance to its eastern neighbors, but more than just technical and financial assistance is needed. Perhaps the EU should work with its partner states to identify long-term goals rather than focusing exclusively on small-scale concerns.

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