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EU, Former Soviet States Agree Summit Declaration

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Heads of states and European Union officials pose for a picture before the Eastern Partnership Summit session in Riga, Latvia, May 22, 2015.

RIGA — Leaders of the European Union and six former Soviet republics concluded a summit in Riga on Friday by issuing a joint declaration on maintaining their "Eastern Partnership," despite differences on key issues.

Highlighting how the previous such meeting 18 months ago in Vilnius triggered an East-West confrontation with Russia, the text included a complex reference to Moscow's annexation of Crimea last year that satisfied Ukraine as well as Armenia and Belarus, which supported Russia in a UN vote on the issue.

A final news conference was held up by an hour while summit chair Donald Tusk telephoned Azeri President Ilham Aliyev. EU officials said it was to soothe concerns Aliyev had about a line in the text relating to Azerbaijan's conflict with fellow Eastern Partner state Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Tusk himself played down those differences at the news conference, saying the call was more about the way the bloc was taking a "differentiated" approach to the six ex-Soviet states, which have very different interests in joining the Western bloc.

Tusk insisted their had not been a rift with the oil-rich, Muslim state on the Caspian Sea: "Azerbaijan wants to strengthen cooperation with the EU," Tusk said.

Of the six eastern partner states: Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are pressing hard for closer ties with the EU; Azerbaijan, where the EU complains of human rights abuses under Aliyev, follows a more neutral line; and Armenia and Belarus have tended to see more in common with Moscow.

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