

Sweden Bemoans Russian 'Economic Warfare'

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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VILNIUS — Sweden accused Russia on Friday of waging "economic warfare" against former Soviet republics that have been considering closer trade relations with the European Union and said the EU needed a strategy to resist Moscow.

The EU is planning to take steps toward signing trade deals with Armenia, Georgia and Moldova at a summit of regional and EU leaders in November in Lithuania and could seal a similar agreement with Ukraine.

Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, speaking Friday during a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Lithuania's capital Vilnius, said Russia had taken advantage of the international focus on Syria to quietly put unprecedented pressure on its neighbors.

"What we have seen during the past few weeks is brutal Russian pressure against the partnership countries of a sort that we haven't seen in Europe for a very long time," Bildt

told reporters.

He was referring to an EU policy of establishing closer links with Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, and supporting democratic reforms in the east, called the "Eastern Partnership."

There was no immediate Russian comment. But Moscow sees former Soviet states as part of its own strategic sphere of influence and has set up a Customs Union and urged them to join it.

Europe views countries in the East as an important energy conduit and wants to see democratic reforms take root in the region. It has never promised EU membership for countries in the region, but spends hundreds of millions of euros on aid.

Bildt said Russia had exerted "extremely heavy pressure" on Armenia to persuade the government in Yerevan to join the Customs Union led by its old Soviet master, and that Moscow had also tried to intimidate Moldova.

"I see they have been threatening Moldova with a cutoff in gas supplies as well as a cutoff in wine exports. This is economic warfare they are threatening against these countries."

Moldova's leaders hit back this week after a Russian envoy warned the tiny former Soviet republic that its pro-Europe policy could bring retaliatory action from Moscow, saying they would not change course.

The Black Sea state of 3.5 million people is heavily indebted to Moscow for cheap gas imports that help keep its economy afloat.

The EU made no joint statements on the issue during the first day of the two-day foreign ministers' meeting in Vilnius, where the agenda included Europe's response to the alleged chemical attack in Syria as well as policy toward the East.

But several ministers other than Bildt expressed similar concerns, saying Russia should not view EU policies on its eastern borders as a threat.

"You can have good relations with Russia and still be part of the European family ... I don't understand why some people in Moscow seem to think that there is only one choice countries can make," Dutch Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans said.

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