

As Russia Grows, EU Goes Cool on Eastern Promises

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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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 — EU leaders meeting in Latvia's capital Riga last week would have paid little heed to the rundown building across the street, seemingly unpainted since Brezhnev's day, or the fading slogan daubed across its roof.

"You are not alone!" it yelled in Russian.

It might have been the mantra recited by the Europeans to six ex-Soviet neighbors at the so-called Eastern Partnership Summit, who went away with EU pledges of aid and trade.

Yet read the gnomonic graffiti another way and you hear a hint of the menace of an uninvited spectator, a slogan for President Vladimir Putin's refusal to leave Moscow's former satellites alone to the embrace of a Western bloc he sees as hostile.

For the first partnership summit since the flare-up of the Ukraine conflict last year was dominated by Russia. And the talks revealed how uneasy many European Union members are about confronting Moscow, leaving Ukraine and other partners, like Georgia and Moldova, feeling the chill.

The summit statement, long on jargon about economic cooperation and democracy, disappointed those seeking a hard promise of EU membership. And though "Russia" appeared just once in 5,000 words, it was the specter at the feast.

It was at the last such summit, held in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius 18 months ago, that Ukraine's then-president triggered an East-West crisis by rejecting an agreement with the EU. That sparked the 'Euromaidan' protests in Kiev that forced him to flee to Russia, which soon afterwards seized control of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and has backed pro-Moscow fighters waging separatist war in the east of the country.

"There is a lot of good stuff in the statement," said one senior EU diplomat who helped draft the Riga communique. "But all that is completely overshadowed by Russia's insistence — which we did not create — that this is a zero-sum game directed against it."

Sharp Divisions

There is clear division among the six states invited to form the Eastern Partnership in 2009: Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are hammering on the EU's door, seeking refuge from the Russian bear; Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus are more ambivalent, just as Brussels is cooler toward them, not least over human rights.

But there is a growing divide among EU members themselves.

Some from the east want a tougher EU line toward Moscow and an open door for the neighbors. Estonia's 35-year-old premier Taavi Roivas, said there should be "no more obstacles" to EU membership once countries met Brussels' standards of governance.

Georgian Foreign Minister Tamar Beruchashvili told Reuters the "very challenging security environment" should make the partnership even more important."

Yet with Western taxpayers wary of the cost of EU expansion, especially of letting in debt-laden Ukraine with its 45 million people, other leaders are keener to ease economically toxic tensions with Putin and deflate what Germany's Angela Merkel called "false expectations" of EU membership.

French President Francois Hollande, Merkel's partner in holding Putin to an ever more shaky cease-fire in eastern Ukraine, stressed EU membership was "no foregone conclusion."

Noting the troubles on Europe's southern flank, in the Middle East and with migration across the Mediterranean, he stressed a need for global cooperation with Moscow.

"We must not turn this Eastern Partnership into yet another conflict with Russia," he said. "I'm sure the European Union and Russia ... can have a discussion directed toward the future."

Mutual Anger

With violence continuing in eastern Ukraine, Moscow renewed its opposition to the bloc's eastern moves. Its EU envoy said "the whole project pursued the goal of splitting... countries away from us," forcing them to be "with the EU or with Russia."

That argument infuriates EU officials who insist it is Moscow, not them, which offers a binary choice to its neighbors.

"The Eastern Partnership is not a beauty contest between Russia and the EU," insisted summit chairman Donald Tusk, a former Polish premier, before venting his frustration at Putin.

"Beauty does count," he went on. "If Russia was a bit softer, more charming, more attractive, perhaps it wouldn't have to compensate its shortcomings by its destructive and aggressive bullying tactics against its neighbors."

Yet those tactics may work. At Riga, a divided EU dashed hopes in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia of a promise of eventual membership. The communique went no further than that at Vilnius to "acknowledge" their "European aspirations."

Tusk, whose own ex-communist country joined the EU a decade ago, pleaded for understanding of the "delicate difference between our promises and the expectations of our partners."

"You have friends and enemies, enthusiasts and skeptics in Europe," he added. "In these geopolitical circumstances in our region ... this is maybe the maximum we can achieve today."

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko avoided criticizing the EU, accepting loans and praising its solidarity. He and Georgian counterparts emphasized to domestic audiences their prospect of soon joining Moldovans in traveling without visas to the EU.

Yet Brussels was shocked after Vilnius by how what seemed in the EU to be a modest project blew up into Cold War-era rhetoric and real bloodshed. And so for all the warm words in Riga, the eastern partners may now feel more alone.

"No one is saying out loud we should end this project," said the EU diplomat involved in preparing the summit. "But the EU is very uncomfortable with this. Russia has shown in words and deeds that it considers the Eastern Partnership a geopolitical project aimed against it. And the EU doesn't do geopolitics."

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