

# The EU's Eastern Partnership

## Why It May Help Democracy Promotion and How the United States Can Help Move It Forward

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The European Union's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative, generally welcomed on both sides of the Atlantic as a positive step toward drawing the countries of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus into the Western orbit, has also received its share of bad press. According to critics, the EU has failed to give these countries a clear European perspective, instead engaging them in a modified version of Cold War-era *Ostpolitik*. I argue, however, that the EaP, while modest in scope and scale, is an opportunity over the long term to encourage not only the modernization and democratization of partner states, but also transatlantic democracy promotion efforts and the advancement of U.S. interests in the region. Using the experience of Belarus, I discuss how the EaP could be further fine-tuned to indirectly promote democracy and give U.S. policy in the region a new sense of direction after its "post-orange" democracy promotion agenda has stumbled.

### **Why Eastern Partnership Matters and Why It May Be Good for Democracy**

The idea for the Eastern Partnership was originally proposed by Poland and Sweden in the spring of 2008, but it was not officially approved until after the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war. The EaP was a symbolically important signal of the EU's commitment to the future of the region. Its importance arises, first, from the EU's assertion that its relations with the countries of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus should not be overshadowed by, or be a mere function of, EU-Russian ties. Additionally, for the first time, the EU differentiated between its Eastern European and Southern (Mediterranean)

neighbors, underscoring the European identity of post-Soviet states in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus.

Still, it remained to be seen whether the EU was ready to support its declarations in practice and provide a powerful economic, political, and civilizational counterweight to Russia. Unfortunately, even before the EaP got underway, it garnered bad publicity for being underfunded (€600 million over four years), under-institutionalized (without even a central office in Brussels), and unsupported by key EU states, the leaders of which did not attend the EaP inaugural summit in Prague in May 2009.

There is little reason to believe that the Eastern Partnership will work the same magic for the countries of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus that EU accession did for Central European and Baltic states. The EaP offers no membership perspective for these countries, and the financial crisis has depleted the EU's capacity to support its policies with spending and investment. From the other side, the EU's eastern neighborhood is itself hardly a community of shared values upon which a stable and enduring alliance could be built or full-blown integration pursued. While some countries in the neighborhood seek EU membership, their elites have thus far failed to furnish these aspirations with practical reforms. Others seem to believe that the West must win, or buy, their willingness to engage with political and economic favors.

Of course, the EaP was never meant to have extensive transformative powers. The EU consciously offered engagement to one flawed democracy (Ukraine) and five hybrid regimes. Even if the final wording of the EaP documents had mentioned shared values and conditionality, the invitation of Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko to the EaP summit in May 2009 underscored that pragmatic realism still lies at the heart of the EaP. The EU does not intend to use the new policy initiative to spread its values in a proactive missionary fashion. It will engage in those areas of greatest interest, such as energy and administrative reform, and will use the language of values to justify its reluctance to proceed with further integrative measures, such as granting a membership perspective or even visa-free travel.

While limited, the EaP is not entirely without transformative capacity. The Eastern Partnership, unlike the largely unsuccessful European Neighborhood Policy, is project-based; it enables both bilateral and multilateral regional cooperation between states with different political systems and different degrees of readiness for full-scale integration into the European space. This provides an opportunity to proactively "drag" new countries into the European orbit through concrete practical cooperation.

There are two ways in which the EaP encourages long-term democratization. First, the EaP's provisions emphasize good governance. The EU realizes that aspirants like Ukraine and Moldova are not ready even for negotiations, let alone membership, and that they must first build proper governments. The EU is prepared to help with this process and provide the same instruments to other countries that may eventually develop pro-European aspirations. Second, the EaP institutionalizes the participation of civil society in the process, which is critical in partner countries that are less than democratic as it extends the legal space for the independent civil sector.

The EaP will not spur new democratic revolutions, but it may irritate local

democrats who resent visitors from Brussels cajoling their dictators. It also will not induce great domestic political change within these countries as it offers no “big prize” in exchange for reform. The EaP is an initiative modest in scope and ambition, the primary impact of which lies in the creation of an institutional framework that will enable the creation of programs to promote economic liberalization and modernization, administrative reform, and increased movement of goods, people, information, and capital over the EU’s eastern border. If these objectives are met, they will, in the long run, help political liberalization and Europeanization of the eastern EU neighborhood. Yet, for these goals to be achieved, the EU must launch more ambitious economic modernization and development initiatives than those currently being debated and which usually replicate past efforts.

### **Eastern Partnership and Belarus: *Realpolitik* or a Way Out of Deadlock?**

The case of Belarusian participation in the Eastern Partnership has underscored many of the dilemmas, hopes, and disappointments of the initiative. The offer of full-scale participation in the EaP was extended to Belarus partially to support the EU’s political dialogue with President Lukashenko, ongoing since August 2008 after the Belarusian leader refused to support Moscow in the war with Georgia and turned to the West for support. Minsk’s other basic motivation for engagement was the understanding that Russia would not bail Belarus out of the coming financial crisis and that the latter would need loans and investment to survive. For years, the EU unsuccessfully applied various policies to encourage Minsk to improve its human rights track record, from feeble attempts at engagement to half-hearted conditionality strategies. The release of political prisoners after the Georgian war gave the EU justification for offering an olive branch to Lukashenko, particularly by suspending visa sanctions against top government officials. The EU also significantly scaled down its political demands that Minsk had to meet before sanctions would be abolished altogether.

While the Belarusian authorities accepted this olive branch, they interpreted it as a sign of EU weakness. They tried to manipulate the dialogue, fulfilling the minimum political conditions for suspending sanctions while standing firm on most EU demands and arguing that engagement should proceed without political preconditions. Lukashenko insisted that the EU abstain from democratization efforts in Belarus in exchange for whatever economic or geopolitical benefits he could offer.

Belarus’ invitation to the EaP posed a certain moral dilemma for the EU, as it meant that it would be extending partnership to a leader who not only has a proven track record of human rights violations but had consistently and tenaciously ignored offers of dialogue and political conditions set forth by the EU for the normalization of relations. It also prompted a certain level of controversy among the Belarusian opposition and within civil society. The political opposition, in particular, insisted that the EU’s offer of partnership should be postponed or limited until the human rights situation in Belarus improved. The opposition feared that it would lose the privileged contacts with the West it enjoyed while the EU isolated Lukashenko’s regime.

By offering engagement and participation in the Eastern Partnership, the EU did

make an implicit commitment to abstain from efforts to explicitly promote any kind of regime change in Belarus. At the same time, EaP participation has already assisted in opening up political space in Belarus, as the government has had to scale down its political repression and at least tolerate a greater degree of autonomy for civil society in order to get good marks in Brussels. At the same time, the EaP helped increase the status of Belarusian civil society, even as the government insisted it would conduct dialogue with the EU “without mediators.” Last, but not least, the symbolic and largely ceremonial concessions made by Belarusian authorities to the EU have had some unexpected consequences; for example, a newspaper that, in November 2008, authorities allowed to be sold legally at state kiosks tripled its circulation in one month. The EaP has also helped to ease the political and intellectual atmosphere in the country. EU-sponsored events have become de facto venues in which the government and the civil society talk and debate for the first time in years. Softening of the political atmosphere, achieved through dialogue with the EU, has also allowed for a certain improvement in Belarusian-U.S. ties. While the United States continues to impose economic sanctions on Minsk, and both sides remain at odds over a 2008 diplomatic row that resulted in the expulsion of nearly the entire staff of the U.S. Embassy in Belarus, the high-profile visit of a Congressional delegation in June 2009 signaled that their stalemate may soon come to an end.

Overall, the case of Belarus has shown that even a program of limited scale like the EaP can have important and positive consequences for a troubled country in the region. Naturally, political progress would not have happened if Lukashenko were not engaged in a cold political and economic war with the Kremlin or if its economy were flourishing. It is an instinct for survival, not a change of heart or mind, that drives Lukashenko toward Europe. However, even if driven by personal interests, he is making concessions and changes which, voluntarily or not, are opening the space for a more profound transformation in Belarus.

## **Eastern Partnership and the United States: A Small but Important Role**

The Eastern Partnership, for now, lacks a transatlantic dimension. The new U.S. administration is reconsidering its policy in the region and reassigning policy priorities, in which Eastern Europe may not be of primary concern. Reviewing what it believes were the failed policies of its predecessor, Barack Obama's administration has scaled down enthusiasm for democracy promotion, withdrawn unconditional support for Ukraine and Georgia's immediate membership into NATO, and reconsidered the placement of missile defense facilities in Poland and the Czech Republic.

While Washington is shifting Eastern Europe down the list of its priorities, it has not abandoned U.S. interests in the region. Consequently, the White House would welcome and support a robust “Eastern” policy developed and promoted by the EU. The U.S. continues to support a common EU energy policy and hopes the EU will address Russia with one voice. Washington also favors building alternative oil and gas supply routes in the region to minimize Russia's blackmailing of Europe and would be happy if the EU would give a clear European perspective to East European countries and, in particular,

facilitate cross-border travel.

Importantly, these priorities fit nicely with what is currently being debated as the practical context of the Eastern Partnership. Pragmatic engagement, emphasis on institution-building, and support for evolutionary change are critical elements of the EaP, but they may also be the United States' new form of promoting democracy and good governance in the region, after the setbacks of the previous administration's "freedom agenda."

There are several ways in which the Obama administration can help promote and support the Eastern Partnership. First, it can take advantage of Obama's personal popularity in key European states to justify and promote closer engagement by so-called Old Europe with the East. Second, the United States can use its political and financial influence to promote and support regional integration initiatives and energy projects, such as the proposed Nabucco pipeline. Third, the United States may take advantage of the fact that Washington supports many civil society organizations that have roles that would be enhanced with the Eastern Partnership. U.S. donors and the democracy promotion community should engage in closer cooperation and coordination, as well as promote EaP-related activities and initiatives for civil society, creating synergy with EU donor efforts.

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