

SMART GEOSTRATEGY FOR THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

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The European Union's (EU's) relationship with Eastern Europe and the Caucasus is at a turning point. Russia's increasingly assertive tactics have chipped away at the ties that bind the six Eastern Partnership countries to the EU, and the entire Eastern Partnership is on the verge of unraveling. To rescue its association with its Eastern partners, the EU must deliver more tangible results. Europe can be both geopolitical and committed to reform—but to strike the right balance, the EU must be more strategic.

Challenges Facing the Eastern Partnership

- Russia has threatened trade sanctions, energy supply interruptions, and security reprisals against states choosing to sign new agreements with the EU. The November 28–29 Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, is now partially an exercise to limit the damage done.
- European governments hope to sign a raft of association agreements at the summit that are designed to lock the Eastern partners into a sphere of European influence and ensure progressive political and economic liberalization.
- Concrete results like association agreements are important, but injecting new momentum into the Eastern Partnership will depend primarily on what happens after the summit.
- European governments must move beyond signing formal contractual agreements and recognize that policy should not be primarily about winning the East and beating Russia. It is not in the EU's strategic interest to see these states destabilized by geopolitical rivalry.
- To build a more sustainable strategy, the EU should facilitate the region's internal cohesion and avoid giving Russia any further incentives to deepen tit-for-tat power struggles. Instead, it should reinforce its positive-sum, values-oriented version of geopolitics.

Recommendations for a Positive-Sum Strategy

Focus less on the technical implementation of EU standards and more on underlying political reform. The EU's current approach assumes countries will be willing to make a huge administrative effort to fit into the EU's template and that will indirectly spur democracy and strategic benefit. Instead, the EU should support and promote democratic standards in a proactive, bottom-up way.

Deliver more tangible benefits faster. Eastern partners that implement reforms should quickly receive benefits from the EU that are tailored to each state.

Use conditionality more consistently and selectively. Incentives should be attached to progress on overcoming core obstacles to democratic and governance reform rather than progress on more tangential administrative hurdles.

Reform the way Eastern Partnership funds are spent. The EU should support civil society organizations in a more agile and participative manner.

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