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Following the Riga summit, more realism is required over what the EU can offer its eastern partners

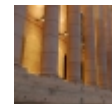


*The latest Eastern Partnership summit was held in Riga on 21-22 May. The summit was the first to be held since the Vilnius summit in November 2013 which precipitated the Ukraine crisis. **Ellie Knott** writes on the outcome of the summit and what it means for the development of relations between the EU and Eastern Partnership states. She notes that the EU is now faced with a difficult balancing act of convincing Russia that it is not engaged in direct competition for influence over post-Soviet states, while offering enough concessions to those Eastern Partnership countries that would like to pursue deeper EU integration.*

The recent Riga summit (21-22 May 2015) was the fourth summit since the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was initiated in 2009. While the Riga Summit may have been a “**survival summit**” against the backdrop of “**war in Ukraine**”, it also signalled “**a new era of our partnership**” between the EU and 6 EaP states, with a new High Representative (Federica Mogherini), EU President (Donald Tusk) and Commissioner for Enlargement (Johannes Hahn).

The interim between the Vilnius (November 2013) and Riga summits saw one of the biggest crises of post-Soviet states. Ukraine experienced both a revolution, and then Russian incursion, first with Crimea’s

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annexation and then with support for separatism in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, leaving the country somewhere between a civil war and full-scale war with Russia.

This period also saw an **acceleration of negotiations** between the EU, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia with the signing of Association (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) in June 2014, and a visa-free regime with Moldova in April 2014. Meanwhile, the three other EaP states, Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan, have signed up to a Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). And yet, in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, even these EaP “laggards” showed renewed interest in intensifying their relations with the EU, as **Kadri Liik** (ECFR) argues, to “hedge against Russia’s pressure”.

With this new EU administration, so too is the EU’s **European Neighbourhood Policy** (ENP), of which the EaP is a major constituent, **under review** in a period of ongoing consultation which will not be finalised until autumn 2015. As such, the Riga summit came during a period of uncertain change and increasing tensions between these post-Soviet EaP states, the EU and Russia. In this sense, Riga was more, as **Pierre Vimont** argues, of a “stock-taking exercise” in the run-up to an uncertain future revision of the ENP.

A “two tier” approach

Although uncertainty remains concerning the future Eastern Partnership approach, two aspects were clear at Riga: the EaP’s emphasis on differentiation and sovereignty. In terms of differentiation, the EU is likely to adopt a two tier approach, continuing more deep engagement with AA/DCFTA states, who are not bound to the Eurasian Economic Union (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia), while offering a more “**tailor-made**” engagement to Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The table below illustrates the current picture among the six EaP states.

Table: Eastern Partnership states

	AA / DCFTA	EU visa-free travel	EEU	Quality of democracy	Corruption score	GDP per capita (euros)	Separatist questions
Azerbaijan	N	N	Y	Not free	126	6,000	Nagorno-Karabakh
Belarus	N	N	Y	Not free	119	5,800	None
Ukraine	Y	N	N	Partly free	142	3,100	Luhansk, Donetsk (Crimea)
Georgia	Y	N	N	Partly free	50	2,700	South Ossetia, Abkhazia
Armenia	N	N	Y	Partly free	94	2,600	Claim over Nagorno-Karabakh



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	Y	Y	N	Partly free	103	1,700	Transnistria
Moldova	Y	Y	N	Partly free	103	1,700	Transnistria

Note: The 'quality of democracy' assessment is from the 2015 Freedom House report. The 'corruption score' is the score (out of 175, where a higher score indicates more perceived corruption) for Transparency International's 2014 [Corruption Perceptions Index](#). GDP per capita figures are from [Eurostat](#).

These states cannot sign up to the DCFTA, as members of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, of which a constituent part is a customs union. They present, therefore, different challenges to the EU in terms of the types of relations possible, requiring a different model to that of AA and DCFTA Eastern Partnership states. Moreover Belarus poses a problem as a state currently under, and unresponsive to, EU sanctions, including a travel ban and asset freezes on 232 individuals and 25 entities, including the country's president, Alexander Lukashenko.

The idea of the Eastern Partnership underlining the sovereignty of its partners became a theme at the Vilnius (2013) summit, but was unmentioned at the previous summits in [Warsaw](#) (2011) and [Prague](#) (2009). At [Vilnius](#), as relations with Russia concerning EaP states became tenuous, the EaP outlined the "sovereign right of each partner freely to choose the level of ambition", to indicate that the EU wanted to resist a coercive Russia deciding how these countries should interact with EU states. At Riga, this discourse of "[sovereign choices](#)" was reaffirmed, alongside shoring up the "territorial integrity" and "independence" of all [EaP states](#).

Hence, we can infer a degree of continuity in the EU's approach towards EaP states, by trying to brand this cooperation as technocratic, endorsing the continued approach of "more for more" (i.e. more access to the EU for more transformation) and endorsing everything short of membership. As [Junker](#) outlined at Riga, EaP states "are not ready [for membership], and we are not ready".

Was the Riga summit a failure?

This sense of continuity is partially responsible for the framing of Riga as "[disastrous](#)" and a "[failure](#)" for two reasons: namely because the EU is unwilling to advance the membership option and also unwilling to castigate Russia's coercive approach toward EaP states. However, it should not come as much surprise that the EU is unwilling to extend the membership option, both in light of the fact that the EU sees these

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states as “not ready”, but also, as **Merkel** argues, because the EaP was not designed as “an instrument for enlargement” but of “rapprochement”. The problem is that the (pro-EU) political class of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova view the membership option as a panacea, both to shore up wavering domestic support for EU integration and as a counter to Russian leverage.

Before 2013, the EaP was largely a technocratic project aimed at encouraging the reform of **democracy, the rule of law and the economies** of partner states, rather than to facilitate a region-building geopolitical project. Hence Russia was not explicitly mentioned in previous joint declarations in **Vilnius** (2013), **Warsaw** (2009) or **Prague** (2009). While Russia might have been mentioned in informal conversations during the Riga summit, in an official context, Russia was mentioned only vis-à-vis the EU’s role in “facilitating gas talks” between Russia and Ukraine.

Implicitly, however, Russia was nevertheless criticised via the **Joint Declaration’s** condemnation of the “illegal annexation” of Crimea and Sevastopol, calls for de-escalation of the conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk, and via the declaration’s emphasis on sovereignty, which can no longer be “taken for granted”. In this sense, **EU leaders** continue to emphasise that the EaP, and more broadly relations between the EU and these post-Soviet states, is not “directed against Russia” nor part of a competition or “beauty contest” with the country.

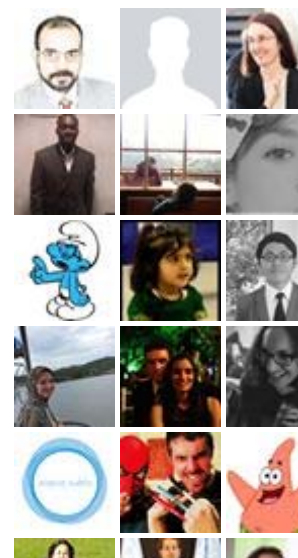
The reluctance of the EU to criticise Russia has been seen as a key failing of Riga, with the EU portrayed as cowering to ongoing Russian aggression. However, the EU continues to irritate Russia, with **Russia’s Foreign Ministry** complaining that “once again [the EU] growled its inadequate position on Crimea”. The refusal of Armenia and Belarus to sign up to the condemnation of Russia’s annexation (in the Joint Declaration) also demonstrates the limits of the EaP in showing a unified front vis-à-vis Russia, given the different perspectives articulated by the six EaP states and, too, within the 28 EU member-states.

What are the challenges going forward?

Looking forward, the EU’s relationship with its Eastern Partners will continue to face significant challenges, both from the more advanced EaP states’ disappointment in not being offered a membership option,



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the delay to visa-free agreements for Georgia and Ukraine, and the difficulties in navigating relations with EaP laggards, who are more advanced in their relations with Russia. In this sense, the “idea” of the Eastern Partnership may be “even more important than ever”, as [Merkel](#) argues, but it is also exposed to more challenges vis-à-vis Russia.

The EU also has to contend with growing apathy toward Europeanisation in EaP states, in particular [Moldova](#) and even Georgia. Key to this is the endemic corruption experienced in some states, notably in Moldova which, following the scandal of the “[missing billion](#)” of GDP, has increasingly seen antipathy toward the pro-European elite directed at the concept of Europeanisation itself. In this sense, the EU has to be more forceful in its “more for more approach” and this includes requiring domestic EaP elites to implement and respect more wide sweeping reforms to try to win back support for Europeanisation.

Russia too will remain a key challenge for the Eastern Partnership and for [European security](#) more generally. Russia’s ability to coerce EaP states relies on territorial weaknesses, such as influence over existing de facto states (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia) and new de facto states (the ‘People’s Republics’ in Donetsk and Luhansk), and anti-democratic elites (e.g. in Belarus and Azerbaijan). Hence, the more successful EaP states are, Ukraine in particular, the more likely Russia will try to push back.

Ultimately, the EU finds itself between a rock and a hard place: between convincing Russia it’s not engaging in a competition for influence, and convincing Eastern Partners they’re committed to them. EU leaders want “[strategic patience](#)”, in an era when they appear increasingly nervous about relations with Russia. When even Belarus wants to intensify its relations with the EU, to increase its leverage against Russia, this shows the tensions existing in EaP states since Russia’s annexation of Crimea. But really it’s up to the political class of EaP states to commit to more reforms, and for the EU to enforce the implementation of these reforms. Yet, there are paradoxes here, such as in Belarus where chances of reform, to the extent desired by the EU, remain unlikely.

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