



Atlantic Council

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Hearing on

*A Pivotal Moment for the Eastern Partnership:
Outlook for Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan*

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A US Strategy for Europe's East

Testimony by

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Chairman Murphy, Ranking Member Johnson, Members of the Subcommittee, in exactly two weeks, European Union (EU) leaders will meet in Vilnius, Lithuania with their counterparts from Europe's East to chart the next wave of European integration. While most EU summits do not merit the attention of the US Senate, this Eastern Partnership summit is different. The sovereignty of the nations between the European Union and Russia is at stake. The outcome of the Vilnius summit will help determine whether the nations of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus will have the option of ultimately joining a Europe whole, free, prosperous, and at peace.

The United States will not have a seat at the table at this summit. However, its results will have enormous strategic consequences for US interests. Therefore, I am here to urge your backing for a clear US strategy in support of the EU's Eastern Partnership. In short, we need a US strategy for Europe's East.

Launched in 2008 as a Polish-Swedish initiative prior to the Russian invasion of Georgia, European leaders envisioned the Eastern Partnership as a modest means to begin to strengthen the ties of the peoples of Europe's East to the EU, but without offering the goal of membership. At its inception, the Eastern Partnership was very much underestimated by the Eastern Partners

themselves, as well as many inside the EU and indeed in both Washington and Moscow. Within five years, the Eastern Partnership has become the leading instrument to help foster the transformation of post-Soviet nations away from a future of Eurasian authoritarian kleptocracy to one of European democratic prosperity.

The Eastern Partnership holds the potential to be a driver of reform as it offers six post-Soviet nations three enticing elements: political affiliation with the EU through Association Agreements, economic integration through deep and comprehensive free trade agreements, and elimination of barriers to travel through liberalization of visa policies. In essence, these are the ingredients to accelerate the adoption of European norms and values in post-Soviet nations, creating facts on the ground in which individual choices shape a country's strategic orientation. The enduring strength of the Eastern Partnership is that its success is driven by attraction, not coercion. Its powerful unspoken premise is that true sovereignty requires greater democracy.

There are two key issues facing the Eastern Partnership. First, will the Vilnius summit mark a major advance in the integration of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, the three Eastern Partnership nations that aspire to closer integration with the EU and have made the most progress in their negotiations? Second, will European leaders evolve the Eastern Partnership to become a pathway for successful reformers to pursue membership in the Union, while keeping open the long-term European option for the others.

This is where the United States becomes relevant.

US leadership has driven each wave of European integration, using NATO as a lead instrument and often paving the way for EU enlargement. With the failure of NATO allies to reach consensus on the path forward for Georgia and Ukraine at the 2008 Bucharest summit, and in the context of the Russo-Georgian War shortly afterward, the United States in essence stepped back from its traditional leadership role of driving this historic process.

While European leaders are not considering offering Eastern Partners a membership option, make no mistake that ultimately the process underway at Vilnius is about integration. If the United States sits on the sidelines, this next wave of European integration and ultimately enlargement will fail. It could fail because Europe remains divided on its objectives, the Russians have chosen to challenge this process, and the most significant obstacles to integration of Europe's East remain security issues that are beyond the purview of the Eastern Partnership.

There is no doubt that this next chapter of integration will be more difficult than in the past. The bar is higher for today's aspiring nations as the EU has become more integrated and intrusive into the once-domestic affairs of its members. The base is also lower as the nations of the Eastern Partnership start further behind in reforms than their neighbors in Central Europe. Furthermore, as membership is not on offer as of now, the cost of reforms at home can be high in the short-term while the long-term reward remains abstract. Furthermore, the Eastern

Partnership nations are an extraordinarily diverse group of nations, united only by their post-Soviet heritage and their European geography. Some indeed do not aspire to greater integration with Europe. Finally, there is great reluctance within the EU even to broach the topic of future enlargement as the Union struggles with its own economic crisis and vacuum in political leadership.

This is why the so-called 'European project' – building a Europe whole, free, prosperous, and at peace – remains in the American national interest, as much as previous phases of this process have. Indeed, the United States remains a European power with enormous influence over this process.

In recent years, there has been a perception among many in Europe's East that the United States was leading on Russia policy while deferring to the EU on policy toward the neighbors. This is overly simplistic of course, but the United States has invested more energy and creativity in forging a relationship with Russia than its neighbors. This is a recipe for failure. We must do both. Thankfully, the United States government is beginning to do just that.

The task today is to develop US strategy to complement and indeed support EU efforts to integrate its neighbors in Europe's East. Yes, the United States wants to avoid its efforts in Europe's East sliding into a US-Russia conflict. But we also do not want that fear to lead to US ambivalence or absence in Europe's East.

The objective of US policy should be to serve as an enabler of European integration and a driver of future NATO enlargement. The EU's Eastern Partnership initiative and future NATO enlargement do not necessarily overlap, but they can be mutually reinforcing just as NATO and EU enlargements have been in the post-Cold War period.

Indeed, the Eastern Partnership is the latest instrument of a common transatlantic grand strategy. The United States fought in World War II not only to defeat the Nazi menace, but to help Europe emerge from war in a way that would never force the United States to fight again in Europe. After 45 years of Cold War, we forged a bipartisan US policy to fulfill our original national aims of 1945. We nearly achieved our goal, with NATO and EU enlargement, the twin instruments of this strategy to secure a Europe whole, free, and at peace.

Even as we celebrate that success, we must also recognize that our work is not done. With NATO enlargement having reached a temporary pause, at least looking East, and EU enlargement in a slower phase, the Eastern Partnership represents the best instrument to keep this vision viable. A renewed US strategy for Europe's East, therefore, should consist of consolidating our gains, preventing rollback of freedoms, and setting the stage for the next advance of integration. The Eastern Partnership is the key instrument for this strategy.

In this context, effective US strategy toward Europe's East in the short-term could include five elements.

First, Washington can help articulate a clear vision and goal: to continue to forge a Europe, whole, free, prosperous, and at peace. That is, to complete Europe. The power of this simple message can be to restore the prospect of integration and ultimate membership in either NATO or the EU as an engine of reform in aspiring nations. Such a vision gives strategic impetus to individual decisions that can seem small in impact when considered in isolation.

Second, US policy can back the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative unequivocally in order to mitigate ambivalence among many EU member states while strengthening the hands of its advocates. Enthusiasm for a coherent EU strategy toward Europe's East varies greatly depending whether you are in Paris and Madrid, or Warsaw and Stockholm. The Bucharest summit experience suggests that a divided EU, much like a divided NATO, will ultimately fail in integrating Europe's East.

Third, the United States should assume a leading role in addressing the security concerns afflicting the Eastern Partners and which are left unaddressed by the Eastern Partnership process.

In Ukraine, this means intensifying mil-to-mil cooperation, deepening intelligence ties, and laying the groundwork for long-term influence with security structures which could either advance or undermine Ukraine's European future. It also means supporting Ukraine's efforts to ensure its energy security and buttress its sovereignty and territorial integrity, including in Crimea.

In Moldova, the United States should build a security relationship where very little currently exists. While officially neutral, Moldova is keen to forge closer ties with the United States and NATO. The United States should target some of its limited assistance on security sector reform, as this sector remains an Achilles' heel for the nation's long-term security. Specifically, the United States could create a Strategic Partnership Council with Moldova to parallel the structures the United States has with Ukraine and Georgia. Such a move would demonstrate consistent support for the three leading nations of the Eastern Partnership. Furthermore, the United States with the EU should engage more seriously and creatively in the "5+2 talks" on Transnistria, a breakaway region, which Moscow seeks to maintain as a lever to complicate Moldova's aspirations. This would entail the United States (and the EU) changing from observer status to full participant in these negotiations and supporting a demilitarization of the conflict.

Regarding Georgia, Washington will need to support the new leadership if and as it pursues democratic and economic reforms, as it asserts it seeks to do. At the same time, we must hold the country's new leadership accountable not to pursue witch hunts or politically-motivated justice. The new government must understand that if it seeks to imprison former President Mikheil Saakashvili, it is freezing its path toward the EU and NATO. If Tbilisi focuses on advancing a European future without litigating its past, Washington should take the lead in restoring a strategy for Georgia to integrate with and eventually join NATO, giving credibility to the Bucharest summit decision that Georgia will become a member of the Alliance.

Fourth, the United States should be working with the EU now to support those nations that take a decisive step toward Europe in Vilnius. For example, the United States should be explicit that as it negotiates a comprehensive Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership with the EU, Washington aims to extend this landmark agreement to any Eastern Partnership nation that concludes a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU. Similarly, as leaders in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia take the right reform decisions and create level electoral playing fields, they should expect to be welcomed in Washington and to receive high-level visits in their capitals.

At the same time, the United States and the EU should anticipate and counter possible Russian efforts to derail these nations' move toward Europe. Moscow has been vocal and specific in threatening these nations with retaliation ranging from bans on imports and mass deportation of labor migrants to energy cut-offs this winter. We know the pressures the Eastern Partners already face and we should be preparing now to assist or counteract such measures where we can. The United States and Europe should work hand-in-hand with governments and societies in the region to prevent Russian rollback of freedom's gains.

Finally, the United States should restore a sense of momentum to the broader integration process by leading the effort to welcome Macedonia and Montenegro into NATO and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia into NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP). These steps can help reinforce the EU's resolve to continue extending its hand to the East.

Many argue that the United States does not need a strategy toward Europe's East – or rather that the best US strategy is to leave the EU in the lead and remain silent. There is a cost to having no strategy. Some leaders in Moscow will conclude that they can maximize their efforts to disrupt Eastern Partners' moves toward Europe without consequences. Therefore, inaction increases the chance of greater instability in Europe's East leading to even greater challenges in the future for US policy. A clear US strategy in support of Europe now will help advance our interests in advancing a free, democratic East and mitigate opportunities for mischief-making in the short-term while laying the groundwork for long-term security, stability, and prosperity.

While Ukrainian President Yanukovich is all but guaranteeing last-minute drama at the Vilnius Summit, what happens beyond Vilnius is as, if not more, important. The Vilnius agreements will begin a process of transforming economies and societies in Europe's East; they do not offer the prospect of EU membership.

By their next Eastern Partnership summit in Riga, Latvia in 2015, EU members states should aim to offer two tracks to their partners: the prospect of beginning the long path to membership for those who make the most progress on reforms, while keeping long-term options open for those partners who either do not aspire to membership or fail to deliver on reforms necessary to start to the process.

Moscow's reaction to the Eastern Partnership provides clarity on the broader strategic perspective of what will play out in Vilnius. While the EU has been clear that the Eastern Partnership is not aimed against Russia, President Putin has decided to treat it as a challenge. Putin is clear that his objective is in essence the restoration of a sphere of domination through the creation of a Eurasian Union and an accompanying Customs Union (which is incompatible with a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU). These instruments are not premised on equality and respect for sovereignty; rather they would enable Moscow to dominate the post-Soviet space. Russia's strategy, as so clearly illustrated in Armenia's decision to drop its bid for an agreement with the EU in Vilnius, is based on coercion and disruption. Such a strategy may result in tactical wins, but ultimately it is not sustainable, as it will not engender the support of individuals in these nations who recognize the opportunities lost. Nor is it a formula for long-term stability, as it rests on intimidation in the short run and deprivation of the sovereign rights of other nations to choose their own future in the long run.

Ukraine presents a particular challenge in Vilnius. Strategically, Ukraine is by far the most important of the Eastern Partners. However, the Yanukovich administration's perception of Ukraine's importance is leading it to do the bare minimum, if that, to meet EU conditions. Specifically, President Yanukovich is not acting decisively to end selective justice and to release former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko from prison. President Yanukovich has the unique ability to unify Ukraine around its European choice – that is to deliver the eastern Ukraine electorate in a way a politician from western Ukraine could not. But in the end, Yanukovich is a transitional figure; he is not committed to the values of a democratic Europe. Even as he negotiates in favor of Ukraine's European future, he is manipulating Ukrainian legislation and institutions to help ensure he secures a second term. Therefore, the challenge in Vilnius is to lock in Ukraine's European choice while gaining leverage to more effectively check anti-democratic behavior and ensure that Ukrainians have a genuinely free choice in their 2015 presidential elections.

The Eastern Partnership is not meant to create a new dividing line in Europe. It can help anchor a vulnerable and insecure zone in the certainty of a stable and prosperous Europe. Over the long-term, the vision of a Europe whole, free, prosperous, and at peace also includes a democratic Russia.

But the pathway to reform in Moscow might begin with choices in Kyiv, Chisinau, and Tbilisi in favor of their European future.