

The Eastern Partnership Riga Summit should not be a non-event

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The upcoming 21-22 May Eastern Partnership (EaP) Riga Summit will take place against the backdrop of the new geopolitical reality in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood, in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea and ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine. Given the extremely complex geopolitical context, the importance of the Summit and the message it delivers to the partner countries – particularly to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, which have made European integration their foreign policy goal – cannot be underestimated. The Summit needs to send a strong, unambiguous signal reconfirming the EU's commitment to the EaP, and offer a clear roadmap for the future. If the Summit turns out to be a non-event, with an empty declaration, it risks being perceived as rewarding the bullying policies of Russia.

The need for a robust declaration

The Summit is an opportunity to add momentum to the political association and economic integration process. While in part the Summit will assess the implementation of the Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, at the same time it is important that those countries that are engaged in an often difficult reform process are shown a light at the end of the tunnel. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of the Latvian Presidency, it seems likely that the Summit's Final Declaration will fall short of expectations. The draft declaration was rather weak and more light-weight than the 2013 Vilnius Declaration. This represents a step backwards given that since the EaP was launched, each Summit has produced an increasingly ambitious declaration.

While the EaP partners understand that there is no appetite in the EU for further enlargement in the foreseeable future, and do not really expect the Summit Declaration to make a reference to a possible membership perspective, there was an expectation that, at the very least, the language used in the 2013 Vilnius Declaration, which stated that EU member states "reaffirm[ed] their acknowledgement of the European aspirations and the European choice of some partners" and pledged to "support those who seek an ever closer relationship with the EU", would be repeated. It was not.

The draft states that the former Soviet states are entitled to a sovereign foreign policy, or, in other words, that EU countries "reaffirm the sovereign right of each partner to freely choose the level of ambition and the goals to which it aspires in its relations with the European Union". Furthermore, concrete deliverables are few. The draft does not include a solid commitment regarding visa liberalisation for Ukraine and Georgia, but simply states that "they [EU member states] look forward to the completion by Ukraine and Georgia of the Implementation of the 2nd phase of their Visa Liberalisation Action Plans".

Of course a weak draft can theoretically be strengthened, as has been the case in the past. However, this time Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have found it more difficult to beef up the text, for two main reasons. First, the fact that the EU produced such a hollow draft reflects, as was recently stated by Thomas de Waal and Richard Youngs in a Carnegie article, that the "[EU] governments' prevailing outlook is one of inertia and geostrategic caution". Some member states believe that the EU should wait and see how the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian-backed separatists develops before taking steps to strengthen ties with EaP states. They do not want to do anything that could provoke Russia or create more turmoil in Ukraine.

Second, there is resistance from other EaP states, in particular those that are part of the Russian-led Eurasian Union. In order to reduce the risk of further tensions with Moscow, there is a clear preference for a weak statement devoid of strong wording. Whatever solidarity previously existed between the EaP states has been eroded as the group has fragmented and chosen different geostrategic paths. This development underlines the fact that having a declaration that reflects the ambitions of all six EaP states is no longer possible.

Unless the draft text is strengthened there is a real risk that the Riga Declaration could end up being perceived as more favourable to Moscow than to those EaP countries that are committed to reform. A recent article in the Russian daily Kommersant entitled “Молдавия теряет Европун” (Moldova loses Europe), which makes a reference to the draft declaration, emphasises the Russian narrative of the EU being an uncommitted partner.

Russia’s expansive disinformation campaign has proven that words shape minds, and a weak statement could be used by Moscow to undermine the credibility of the EU. This will impact the ability of authorities in EaP countries to push ahead with reform and continue to convince society that the EU is standing “shoulder to shoulder” with them.

Moreover, taking a wait-and-see approach or appeasing Russia is unlikely to affect the course that Moscow chooses to take *vis-à-vis* Ukraine or any other of the EaP countries. Ambiguity and weakness will only demonstrate that the course Moscow has chosen is the right one and that the EU is weakening in its resolve to stand strong and united against Russia.

The Latvian Presidency wants the Riga Summit to deliver concrete results and so it should. Beyond upholding the territorial integrity of all the EaP states, along with their right to decide their future and recognising that no third party can challenge their legitimate choices, the Summit Declaration must at the very least repeat the language that was used in the Vilnius Declaration in 2013.

It should also clearly state that the EU is committed to granting visa-free travel to Ukrainian and Georgian citizens in 2016 once both countries have fully implemented the second phase of their visa liberalisation action plans. The visa-free regime carries a strong message of EU support in response to the extensive Russian propaganda, which is directed towards undermining the public trust in the EU. It would be a sign that the European agenda does deliver and that there are concrete, tangible benefits in it for the average citizen.

It should also call on those member states that have still not ratified the AA/DCFTA with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia to do so quickly, as it will make the Agreements legally binding and applicable in their entirety. Furthermore, the EU’s ‘more for more’ tenet should be translated into a better tailored financial assistance and support in legal approximation efforts. If it is impossible to reach an agreement with all EaP states then a separate declaration with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia should be agreed upon.

Ultimately, if the end result is a weak and empty Declaration it leaves the impression that it has been penned to please Russia and not those EaP states that are pushing for change. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have already paid a significant price for their European choice: trade embargos, political pressure, military aggression, occupation and annexation. The EU needs to be equally courageous.

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