

The New Near East
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In less than 15 years, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have gone from communist dictatorship to Western-style democracy. The Iron Curtain that divided Europe is gone, thanks to the energy of the people of these countries and their hunger for freedom and prosperity.

After World War II, Europe was a continent in tatters. Six countries banded together to form the Coal and Steel Community to ensure peace and create prosperity. Now -- more than 50 years later -- the same driving force will make 75 million people into new citizens of the European Union on May 1.

The expansion means difficulties and challenges for European cooperation. Negotiations on the new EU constitution were broken off late last year because of disagreement about the distribution of power among countries. The talks will resume; there is, in fact, no question of a crisis. But this is a good example of the sort of difficulties that will arise as East meets West and many countries with different backgrounds, histories and cultures come together. Expansion will perhaps bring the most uncertain period in the EU's history.

Such problems are, of course, of little consequence in comparison with the advantages. Expansion is a historic step toward a better future for the whole of Europe. The opportunities are much greater than the difficulties.

For this reason, EU cooperation needs to be broadened in the future to cover "the new Near East": Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. The Communist Iron Curtain used to shut these countries in. Now, as the EU's frontiers move eastward, the curtain is gone but many people in the new neighbor countries feel they've once again ended up on the wrong side of a border. This time they feel shut out. When on May 1 Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland are given better opportunities for economic growth and welfare, the people of Belarus and Moldova will instead see greater difficulty in managing their own sustenance. This is creating unrest and a breeding ground for future conflict.

Our neighbors in the new Near East inhabit a region that has, unfortunately, long been treated as the European Union's back yard. An EU policy titled "A Wider Europe -- a New Neighborhood Initiative" voices EU support for democratic and economic reforms initiated by its neighboring countries. It's a good start. But I would suggest that what's really needed is a long-term approach by the EU to open up opportunities for future membership. It would constitute a powerful driving force to help these countries democratize and modernize.

In Russia, yet a farther step eastward, there are disturbing signs that the movement toward democracy and stability has come to a halt. Last December's elections to the

Duma were free, to be sure, but hardly just. The coming presidential election features virtually no competition for the incumbent. Dangerous nationalistic currents can be discerned in public attitudes and in the longing for a strong leader to restore to Russia something of her former glory. There is every reason to monitor developments in Russia carefully.

The countries east of the EU are in a delicate phase of their transition to democracy. Stability and peace not only benefit development in these countries but are also of great importance for security in a global perspective. For the sake of future world security, Europe and the United States must buttress Euro-Atlantic cooperation on safety, and the new Near East should be a joint priority on our agenda.

In short, the EU's integration with the East must be extended to the countries that will now become the new neighbors of the European Union and NATO. The United States must also have a presence in the region. Together we can support stability, economic prosperity and democracy. General and social security for the people of Russia and the new neighbor countries will also bring improved security for the people of the EU and the United States.