The first-place finish of Viktor Yanukovych in the initial round of Ukraine’s presidential elections on January 17, and his chances for success in the second round on February 7, might lead some to believe Ukrainians have lost interest and faith in the country’s Western future. Surveys conducted last year have shown a drop in popular support among Ukrainians for integration with the European Union. For example, a survey from the European Council on Foreign Relations showed only 34 percent of Ukrainians supported EU membership in 2009. Yet concluding that Ukrainians—including either Yanukovych or his challenger in the second round, Yuliya Tymoshenko—are turning their back to Europe would be hasty: Ukrainians are mainly growing frustrated with a process they expected would be shorter and clearer. The trend is similar to that in Central and Eastern European countries in the late 1990s, when the pains of accession hit. 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the ambiguous role Ukraine played (particularly in the 2009 case), combined with paralyzing political infighting and lack of will to reform, doubts grew in the minds of many in Europe about Ukraine’s genuine desire to be part of the West. Yet it has been the Russian-Georgian War that clearly changed the relationship between Ukraine and the European Union. Russian action in Georgia has made Ukraine’s leadership worry about the territorial integrity and independence of its country. Ukraine’s new desire for political and military guarantees from the West against a Russian invasion of its territory has been given a cold shoulder and met with high reservations. The incoherence of the EU’s approach to Ukraine (and, for that matter, to the region), combined with the diverging interests of members states and the EU’s concern with internal issues, have pushed Ukraine to believe that the European Union has lost interest in the country. Just like the lack of progress over the last five years, the country’s deep economic crisis and the irresponsibility of the country’s leaders have pushed the European Union even farther away.

Yet Ukraine needs the European Union. In the short term, it needs the EU’s assistance to pay for its gas. In the long term, Ukraine could use the EU’s help in designing economic policies and in supporting their implementation—the country’s economy cannot perform without deep, structural reforms. At the same time, Ukraine needs to reform its administration, its judiciary, and possibly its constitution. While these are exclusively domestic problems, the experience of new EU member states in such reforms could help Ukraine implement them more smoothly and efficiently. Ukraine also desperately needs to develop its research and technology capacity, a field where the European Union can prove a solid partner, just as it can be in the reform of higher education. Ukraine needs to trade freely with the European Union, and it needs freedom of movement for its people. And last but not least, Ukraine needs to be part of a wide European security arrangement.

The European Union needs Ukraine, too. It obviously does so for its supply of natural gas, the issue that makes Ukraine so needed and, at the same time, so unpopular. With the enlargement of 2007, Ukraine has become the EU’s neighbor, and this is a new reality Europe needs to adapt to. It needs a stable and friendly neighbor, one it can do business with, and one it can trust. A prosperous and stable Ukraine is an important market for European goods, not least technology and know-how. Ukraine is also important because the entire eastern neighborhood is of importance to the European Union. Ukraine’s success, hopefully combined with that of Moldova’s (now led by Western-leaning democrats), would lend different dynamics to the entire region, stimulate its progress, and enhance its security. This would advance the goal of a Europe whole, free, and at peace.

“Further enlargement of the EU is under serious question, and the EU needs more time to internalize its new eastern borders and act according to its new status of a legitimate actor in the Black Sea region.”

Further enlargement of the European Union is under serious question, and the EU needs more time to internalize its new eastern borders and act according to its new status of a legitimate actor in the Black Sea region. Yet the importance of Ukraine to the European Union has always been clear; and the two have slowly but surely developed necessary, albeit not yet sufficient, mechanisms to cooperate. After the signing of the action plan in 2005, the possibility of an EU-Ukraine association agreement started generating conversation. This agreement, which if all goes well will be signed at the end of 2010, would include provisions for visa liberalization and a more comprehensive free trade policy.

After the Russian-Georgian War, the European Union also moved forward on a new instrument to channel its policies with six countries in its eastern neighborhood, Ukraine included. The Eastern Partnership, as it’s called, while seen by many as an insufficient incentive, offers many important actions to promote closer relations with the European Union. The European Union has also opened an EU border monitoring mission at the Ukrainian-Moldovan border, an operation that helped stabilize and clear the traffic between the
Transnistrion part of Moldova. The European Union has also advanced funds to Ukraine to help it pay its Gazprom gas bills throughout 2009. All these actions still fall short of membership, yet they are good tools for Ukraine’s advancement and a serious sign of EU interest in and support for that country.

Both parties need to work harder on their relationship. The European Commission needs to ensure that all mechanisms necessary for complete and efficient implementation of the Eastern Partnership are in place, a task that does not seem to be given the priority it deserves. Developing a clear vision for its eastern neighborhood would also give Ukraine, and other countries in the region, a clear sense of what their geopolitical role is. Equally important, Ukrainian politicians need to assume the responsibility their people have given them, and embark on the necessary, albeit unpopular, reforms. The pressure of the country’s strained economic situation might leave them no choice but to take the necessary actions. Both candidates in the February 7 second round of elections have vowed to move Ukraine closer to the EU. The economic pressure and the unequivocal support of the population for a European path for the country might be the right incentives for whomever the next president will be to take full advantage of the political honeymoon and push difficult reforms forward.

If the European Union properly fills its role as a responsible actor in the Black Sea region and if Ukraine’s new leadership stabilizes its economic and political situation, the EU-Ukraine relationship might finally be based on mutual trust and attraction.

Alina Inayeh, Director, Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, GMF

Alina Inayeh is the director of the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, a GMF project dedicated to strengthening cooperation and foster development in the Black Sea Region. Ms. Inayeh is an active practitioner in the field of international development and democratization, having run the Freedom House office in Ukraine, in 2004, and the NDI office in Russia, between 2000-2003, with a focus on civic education and political processes. She has trained NGOs throughout Central and Eastern Europe and FSU on issues related to NGO development and democratization. Ms. Inayeh has been a leading civic activist in the 1990s in her own country, Romania, and an active promoter of the NGO sector in the country. Ms. Inayeh received her bachelor’s degree in geology from the University of Bucharest and a master’s degree in public policy from the University of Princeton.

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