

Russia's Westpolitik and the European Union

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Executive Summary

Russia's relationships with its neighbors and with the West have evolved significantly since the end of the Cold War. The war in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea, and the beginning of the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 were key events that changed Russia's status as a "strategic partner" of the European Union to a "key strategic challenge" in 2016. In 2020, simultaneous crises in Belarus and Nagorno-Karabakh further clarified this shift. These events produced the greatest challenge to European security since the Cold War and have intensified the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West.

However, recent events make clear that Russia is losing influence in Eurasia. Russia's aggressions against Georgia and Ukraine have contributed to regional instability and have strengthened the national resilience of these countries against the Kremlin's interest; Vladimir Putin's support for Alexander Lukshenko in Belarus has strengthened EU and U.S. support for the Belarussian opposition; and Turkey garnered a leading role in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict at Moscow's expense. The commitment to the region from external powers such as the European Union, China, Turkey, and the United States underscores Russia's limited economic resources and its lack of soft power appeal. But the Kremlin's main interests—blocking the enlargement of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to the east and maintaining the region as a "zone of privileged interest"—remain intact as it attempts to adapt to new circumstances by changing tactics.

The European Union is also internally divided in its attitude toward Russia. While the historical experiences of the Baltic states and former Warsaw Pact countries in central and eastern Europe have made these EU members wary of Russia, this wariness can be difficult to reconcile with the attitude of larger partners such as Germany (which has stuck by its long-standing strategy of economic engagement with Russia) or France (which in 2019 [urged](#) a reset in relations with Russia). As a result, the key question for the European Union is how to turn the five principles that have guided its policy toward Russia since 2016—which EU Vice President and High Representative Joseph Borell recently [summed up](#) as "push back,

contain, and engage”—into a political strategy. Without a clear negotiating framework rooted in democratic values, disastrous meetings between senior EU and Russian officials, such as the recent meeting between Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and Josep Borrell in Moscow, will be the norm rather than the exception. To craft such a strategy, the European Union should forge a relationship with Russia free of false hopes and expectations about Russia’s possible integration into the international liberal order by recognizing what Russia is: a declining revisionist power that in the long term will maintain its presence in Eurasia.

Introduction

This report has two main objectives:

1. To analyze Russia’s Westpolitik (or Western policy), which includes the objectives, motives, and strategies of Russia’s policy of re-imperialization in the so called “[in between states](#)” of Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the successes, limits, and failures of this policy; and
2. To examine the consequences of this policy for Russia’s relationship with the European Union and for the European Union itself.

The concept of the re-imperialization of Russia was introduced by Henry Kissinger in 1994, in reference to the potential threat to the West posed by Moscow’s intention to preserve its zones of influence in the post-Soviet space. In this brief, the term re-imperialization is identified in relation to Russia’s Westpolitik, which alludes to the former Federal Republic of Germany’s Ostpolitik, its Cold War era policy of engagement toward East Germany and Eastern Europe.¹ The Kremlin’s Westpolitik embodies a series of policies and actions which allow the Kremlin to influence the political sovereignty of its neighbors by force, coercion, or the collaboration and co-optation of their political elites. The concept of Westpolitik also refers to Eastern Europe and conveys the Kremlin’s perception that there is a new dividing line in Europe along Russia’s western border. This dividing line falls between liberal Europe, which remains committed to the international liberal order, and the illiberal, “Eurasian” Europe where Russia and the countries in its sphere of influence are located.

For President Vladimir Putin, Westpolitik is also a [consequence](#) of the failure of the Euro-Atlantic community to create a security system that acknowledges Russia’s interests. As Dmitri Trenin [affirms](#), foreign and security policy is the private domain of Putin. President Putin is surrounded by a group of Russian political leaders who are waging a [hybrid war](#) against the United States and the European Union to ensure the survival of the Russian state in its current form, to recover the role of a great power, and to prevent the eastern enlargement of NATO and the European Union, particularly in Ukraine and other countries on Russia’s western border.

Key political and economic figures close to President Putin and the *silovki* (state security forces) share an anti-liberal, conservative, conspiratorial, and anti-Western ideology and favor more repressive policies. Among these leaders, those that Russian analyst Tatiana Stanovaya [calls](#) “the protectors” stand out in particular because they act as the “watchdogs” of the current regime. This group constitutes an opportunistic alliance between those who manage the repressive apparatus of the state and those who legitimize it through the law. Putin’s current presidential term has witnessed a growing alliance between the *silovki* and the “protectors,” which has made their ideology increasingly prominent in official discourse

1 Ostpolitik describes the political process led by West Germany to normalize relations with the nations of Eastern Europe during the Cold War.

and heightened their political influence. But beyond the narrow circle of politicians who influence Putin's decisions, there are actors who waiver in their support of the Russian president because they consider him too moderate. For this group, which captures a wide range of ideologies united by a nationalist and anti-Western ideology, Russia must rebuild its empire in order to become a great power again.

The Kremlin's Westpolitik embodies a series of policies and actions which allow the Kremlin to influence the political sovereignty of its neighbors by force, coercion, or the collaboration and co-optation of their political elites.

The first battleground of the anti-Westerners is Russia's near abroad, or the in-between states. Russia's **ambition** is to create a multipolar world by weakening the model of the unipolar international order led by the United States and, by extension, the West. In order to maintain parity with the United States and to secure its great power status, Russia needs the recognition of Western states and to be treated as if it were the Soviet Union: a nuclear superpower whose interests in maintaining "zones of privileged interest" in the post-Soviet space are legitimate.

Russia: A Post-Imperial and Revisionist State

The policy of Westpolitik is shaped by Russia's status as a post-imperial and revisionist state, as well as by an understanding of national security that equates security with expansion, summarized in Catherine the Great's memorable **phrase**: "I have to expand my borders in order to keep my country secure."

The Soviet Union's borders coincided with the borders of the imperial Russian Empire (1550–1914) for 69 years (1922–1991). The relatively peaceful decomposition of the Soviet Union (1991) represented the end of the empire. However, the Kremlin's **determination** to maintain frozen conflicts along its periphery and ensure that its former Soviet republics have limited sovereignty demonstrates that the disintegration of the empire and the divorce between the republics remain works in progress.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a historic opportunity to undertake a process of transition to democracy in Russia. As Lilia Shvetsova **explains**, Boris Yeltsin attempted to accomplish this titanic task through four simultaneous revolutions: (1) creating a free market; (2) democratizing political power; (3) transforming the empire into a nation-state; and (4) finding a new role for a country that was already a nuclear power. This project failed because of Russia's historical legacy, the structural contradictions in the transition process, and personal factors related to Boris Yeltsin (his serious alcoholism and health problems and the appointment of his daughter Tatiana Yumasheva as an "advisor" served to discredit his efforts). Because of this failure, Russia is not a democratic nation-state but a **post-imperial one**. The elements of the empire are still very visible: the Russian Federation is a neo-tsarist and authoritarian state, and its transformation into a nation-state has not been completed.

Russia is also a **revisionist** state for three main reasons. First, Moscow considers the agreements made with former Soviet states after the dissolution of the Union in 1991 unfavorable to Russia's national interests

and security. Second, the international order created and led by the United States after the end of the Cold War does not recognize Russia's status as an equal power. And finally, 30 years later, a post-Soviet Russia has only begun to formulate a new national identity with a mixture of themes from its pre- and post-Soviet history, conforming to the borders and agreements with former Soviet republics that emerged after the disintegration of the common state.

Throughout its history, Russia frequently debated its national identity, which was ambiguous due to its geographical location between Europe and Asia and its multiethnic composition. In some periods, including during the reign of Peter the Great (eighteenth century) and the period after the Napoleonic Wars, Russia looked West and embraced a European identity. But when it had problems with the West, as in the aftermath of the Crimean War (1853–1856), it stressed its Eurasian or Eastern identity, or its messianic role as a unique civilization and “unifying nation,” which exalts Russians as an imperial people with the sacred mission of creating a supranational state.

In the 1990s, Russian political and intellectual elites considered five possible **concepts** of national identity: (1) “the unifying nation,” (2) “the nation of all East Slavs,” (3) “the nation as a linguistic community,” (4) “the nation as race,” and (5) “the civic nation.” None of these five concepts were fully accepted by Russian citizens, and today Russia is a state, but not yet a nation. This failure to find a new national identity has **allowed** Putin to impose his own definition, based on the demands of Russian nationalists and relying heavily on the idea of “compatriots abroad.”

In 1992, Yeltsin introduced the term “compatriot abroad” (which was suggested by the analyst Sergey Karaganov) to refer to ethnic Russians who now found themselves outside the formal borders of the Russian Federation but had cultural and linguistic ties with Russia.² The 1993 military doctrine of the Russian Federation **held** that the suppression of ethnic Russians in the near abroad represented a military threat to Russia. Already in the 1990s, several state programs were created to promote ties with compatriots in the near abroad, but it was the 2008 document *Strategy 2020 (Strategia 2020)* that **emphasized** that the interest and security of these compatriots would be militarily protected by Russia. Later that year, former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev **justified** Russian support to Russian separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by connecting it with the right of Russia to protect its compatriots. Putin later used the same argument to justify the annexation of Crimea and support for pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine. In July 2014, three months after the annexation of Crimea, he **stated**, “I would like to make it clear to all: our country will continue to actively defend the rights of Russians, our compatriots abroad, using the entire range of available means—from political and economic to operations under international humanitarian law and the right of self-defense.”

The right of Russia to defend its compatriots in the former Soviet republics is the key element of the process of Russia's **re-imperialization**. What alarms neighboring states is that Russian federal law defines the term “compatriot” in a very **inclusive manner**, enabling the Kremlin to consider virtually anyone with ties to Russia or the former Soviet Union as a “compatriot.”

Prinudit k družbje (“Forced to be a friend”)

The main objective of Russia's Westpolitik is to block the enlargement of the European Union and NATO to the east. By creating Russian-led economic, political, and security and defense organizations which integrate its neighbors, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian

² Karaganov **wrote**: “We must be enterprising and take them [compatriots] under our control, in this way establishing a powerful political enclave that will be the foundation for our political influence.”

Economic Union, Russian influence is expanded regionally through “soft power” instruments. This is accompanied by economic coercion or military pressure on states that seek to resist Russian influence or seek to join Euro-Atlantic institutions. There is an **expression** dating back to the tsarist era which defines this attitude beyond geopolitics—*prinudit k druzhbe*, or “forced to be a friend.”

The coercive methods used to achieve this vary widely. Tactics such as shutting off gas to its neighbors, providing weaponry and training to separatists, ensuring that “frozen conflicts” are never resolved, or intervening militarily are used to prevent Russia’s neighbors from exercising independent policy action. These methods include economic power (e.g., the connection of and reliance on Soviet infrastructure favors economic ties between Russia and independent countries), soft power, “soft coercion” (e.g., economic blackmail in the form of embargoes on agricultural products in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia), “hard coercion” (e.g., interruptions in gas supply in Ukraine), hard power (e.g., the use of military power in Georgia and Ukraine), and the annexation of territories (e.g., Crimea). However, once soft instruments are deployed for hard power purposes, they **cannot** easily become soft power tools again.

Russia’s soft power is closely linked to the politics of “compatriots.” For the Kremlin, soft power is the effort to strengthen linguistic, cultural, economic, and religious affinities with neighboring states and engage a wide range of interest groups through **five main instruments**: (1) public relations and public diplomacy; (2) the media; (3) the Russian Orthodox Church; (4) commissions devoted to “correcting distorted history” (e.g., the interpretation that the Soviets liberated Eastern Europe from Nazism and did not occupy these nations); and (5) foundations, associations, clubs, and congresses to coordinate a common policy with “compatriots” and promote cultural and scientific cooperation, Russian language, and culture beyond Russia’s borders. Former states of the Russian Empire are particularly susceptible to this influence due to the foundation of a shared cultural and political background.

Of the instruments of soft power described above, the most important are the Russkiy Mir Foundation (“Russian World Foundation”) and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The Russkiy Mir Foundation was created by decree by President Putin in 2007 and is a joint project of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education. Its **founding principle** is to preserve and promote Russian language and culture in the contemporary world. But the ROC and Patriarch Kirill I of Moscow (one of the most important political figures in Russia) are probably the most important instruments of Russia’s soft power, and Moscow’s religious diplomacy **serves** the pursuit of a pragmatically defined national interest. While the ROC is **not completely controlled** by the Kremlin, it acts in coordination with the Kremlin on matters of domestic policy and with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on foreign policy matters to help advance Russia’s national interests abroad. In 2011, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Moscow Patriarchate **founded** a joint working group “to exchange their assessment of various situations in particular regions of the world where there are Orthodox believers.”

Russia’s hybrid warfare blurs the distinction between soft power and hard power. Although no document in the **military doctrine** explicitly mentions the concept of “hybrid warfare,” the Russian Ministry of Defense introduced it in a 2003 **white paper on defense** by defining future conflicts as “asymmetrical.” This concept was further elaborated in 2013 by the Russian chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, General Valery Gerasimov, in a speech delivered at a Russian military conference **titled**, “The value of science in foresight. New challenges require a rethinking of the forms and methods of warfare.” The concept of hybrid warfare also fits perfectly into the Leninist Orthodox tradition that considers peace to be only a state of pre-war, or of latent, infinite warfare. In this sense, soft power is only a **first step** toward hard power.

According to American political scientist Agnia Grigas, there are seven phases when converting soft power to hard power. The purpose of the initial phases is to increase the loyalty of the “compatriots” to the Kremlin and decrease their loyalty toward their local and national governments through: strengthening linguistic, cultural, and religious ties; providing humanitarian aid (e.g., food, medicine, and economic investments); and articulating different policies specifically aimed at compatriots (e.g., organization of congresses, cultural and scientific cooperation, and foundations to promote Russian culture). Subsequent phases include the systematic distribution of Russian citizenship (“passport-ization”) to convert compatriots into Russian citizens and engaging in *dezinformatsia* (“disinformation”) aimed at discrediting so-called opponents and distorting the perception of reality of target groups. Disinformation that seeks to emphasize the suffering and vulnerability of minority Russian populations in Russia’s near abroad is also critical to the process of re-imperialization and helps push Russian diplomacy to protect compatriots if their safety is threatened or to act militarily if they request protection from Russia—which frequently **means** formal (e.g., annexation of Crimea) or informal (e.g., frozen conflicts) control of the territory where the compatriots live.

Frozen conflicts, which fuse elements of soft and hard power together, are an increasingly attractive option for maintaining and asserting Russian influence in the region. Many of these “frozen conflicts” are themselves unresolved legacies of the Soviet era and are now being used to ensure Russia’s periphery remains wedded to Moscow rather than to Brussels or Washington. For example, Moldova’s new, pro-Western president can request that Russian forces leave Transnistria, but it cannot force them to leave. Newly arrived Russian military forces in Armenia will perform a similar function. Russia’s military presence allows it to effectively exert influence in these countries and destabilize Euro-Atlantic security aims. But this strategy does not always go according to plan. In Moldova, Russia’s rivalry with the European Union has intensified as the country has moved away from Moscow, such as by signing the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the European Union in 2016 and increasing its cooperation with NATO. In the most recent presidential elections in Moldova, held on November 1, 2020, the **victory** of pro-European candidate Maia Sandu signified that even greater rapprochement between Moldova and the European Union is on the horizon.

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The Successes, Limits, and Failures of Russia’s Westpolitik

The biggest success of Russia’s Westpolitik is its successful blockade of EU and NATO enlargement to the east (though it failed to prevent Montenegro or North Macedonia from joining NATO). By annexing Crimea, recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states and integrating them more closely with Russia, and politically, economically, and militarily supporting the pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine, Russia has fulfilled multiple objectives. First, Ukraine and Georgia cannot function as independent states and will likely be unable to join NATO or the European Union with parts of their country occupied by Russian forces. Second, the European Union and the United States have been forced to acknowledge the limits of their influence in Russia’s neighborhood.

However, Russia's Westpolitik can also be a double-edged sword. The more that Russia intervenes economically and militarily in its neighbors' affairs, the more it risks weakening popular support for Russia and strengthening each country's individual nationalism and national identity. This has clearly been the case for Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus, where nationalism has grown substantially. It may also be true to a lesser extent in Moldova and Armenia. In fact, only 5 out of 14 post-Soviet states are allied or partnered with Russia, and **three of those** countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) have focused on increasing political and economic ties with China.

While the objectives of Russia's Westpolitik have not changed, the Kremlin has had to adapt in light of these diminishing returns. Recent developments in Nagorno-Karabakh and Belarus offer insights on how it has sought to change its methods.

Nagorno-Karabakh

The conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh began in 1994, but its roots date back to 1923, when the Soviet Union annexed Nagorno-Karabakh, with its ethnic Armenian majority, to the Republic of Azerbaijan and granted it a high degree of self-government. When the USSR collapsed in 1991, the region declared itself independent, triggering a war that lasted until 1994. The war **ended** with Armenia occupying seven enclaves around the region in order to create buffer zones, and Azerbaijan suffered significant losses. Despite the United Nation's recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh has remained a "frozen conflict," with intermittent military skirmishes between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Since 1994, the Minsk Group—composed of the United States, France, and Russia and established by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)—has sought a diplomatic solution to the conflict. But the West seems to have lost interest in resolving the conflict—the Minsk Group has not presented any new initiative to bring the conflict to an end since 2007. And previous draft agreements accepted by the political elites of Armenia and Azerbaijan were **rejected** by their respective populations.

The most recent war between Armenia and Azerbaijan (September–October 2020) differs from previous outbreaks because of Turkey's notable and decisive military support for Azerbaijan (Ankara has supported Baku since 1994 but never so openly), turning Nagorno-Karabakh into a **strategic arena** for Russia and Turkey's rivalry to play out. While Russia brokered the truce that ended the fighting and expanded its military presence in the Caucasus by deploying approximately **2,000** Russian military personnel in Armenia along the line of contact with Azerbaijan, the Kremlin did not come to Armenia's assistance during the conflict (its bilateral defense agreement exempted Nagorno-Karabakh).

The conflict's outcome forced Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia—who had been **gradually distancing** Armenia from Russia since 2018 and moving it closer to the European Union—to resign and call for new elections (a positive outcome for Moscow). However, the future of Russia's political influence in Armenia is uncertain due to anger that Moscow did not come to Yerevan's aid—all but ensuring its defeat. But Moscow has never committed itself to defending Armenian positions in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, which Russia has always legally recognized as part of Azerbaijan and where it has tried to mediate between the two sides. The Kremlin will likely try to maintain good relations with both parties in the conflict.

Russia's passivity throughout the conflict **opened the door** to Turkey's military deployment, meaning that Russia is no longer the sole mediator in this conflict. It is unclear whether Turkish forces will deploy to Azerbaijan to participate in a similar "peacekeeping mission," which would mean that Turkey and Russia

have forces deployed on the opposite side of three theaters: Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh.³ Although accepting the presence of a rival power such as Turkey in its near abroad is not pleasant for Moscow, Turkey is a **more malleable** partner than many other NATO countries.

Belarus: A Mirror of Russia?

The current crisis in Belarus began after its flawed presidential election on August 9, 2020, which gave rise to massive street protests against President Alexander Lukashenko. With Russian support in the event that the situation gets out of control, the Belarusian regime has **responded violently** against peaceful protestors, detaining thousands of people, imposing stricter controls over the media, and jailing opposition figures (or forcing them to leave the country). These actions have had the intended effect of suppressing public protests and eliminating organized political opposition.

Although Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the titular leader of the Belarusian opposition, continues to advocate for the release of political prisoners and new elections that would enable a democratic transition to take place, there is very little traction. Tikhanovskaya has **criticized** the West for failing to put sufficient external pressure on Lukashenko's regime, and internal pressure has largely declined. Both Lukashenko and Tikhanovskaya have competing proposals to change the constitution, but Lukashenko has promised that a new constitution will be ready by the end of 2021 and that a referendum on the new constitution, alongside local elections, will be held on January 18, 2022. Proposed revisions are being considered by the All-Belarusian People's Congress to begin this process, but these are merely cosmetic changes to ensure he retains power.

According to experts, **three scenarios** are currently possible in Belarus: (1) the establishment of a dialogue between the regime and the opposition, in order to proceed with constitutional changes and ensure a peaceful transition of the regime (the preferred outcome for the opposition); (2) the manipulation of the transition by Lukashenko, who could simulate changes and agree to organize new elections but manipulate them in much the same way he has done in the past; or (3) military intervention by Russia in Belarus (a scenario that remains very unlikely for now).

For the Kremlin, the case of Belarus is more important than Nagorno-Karabakh because of its geographical proximity to NATO countries and because Putin fears a similar crisis of political legitimacy could strike Russia. Its main objectives in lending support to Lukashenko (or any other government that it seeks to control) are to prevent Belarusian rapprochement with the European Union and NATO and to prevent the Belarusian civic awakening from spreading to Russia. Understanding that a majority of Belarusians have lost confidence in the Belarusian president, the Kremlin has begun to **prepare** for the eventual transition of Lukashenko in spite of the fact that Putin **declared** on Russian state television that he has special forces ready to support the "legitimate government of Alexander Lukashenko." But for now, Moscow is attempting to shape the Belarusian political landscape. The Kremlin's disinformation has **promoted** the narrative that the protests are the fruit of a Western and NATO conspiracy. Moreover, the financial support Lukashenko has **received** from Moscow (Putin agreed to provide a \$1.5 billion loan to Belarus in September 2020) has helped strengthen Lukashenko domestically.

The European Union is supportive of the Belarusian opposition and has condemned the violence of the Lukashenko regime. In addition to adopting a package of sanctions against Belarusian political leaders, the European Union has demanded new elections with international observers, the release of political prisoners,

3 Conversation with a Russian journalist, November 27, 2020.

and promotion of the idea that the OSCE should mediate a possible dialogue between the regime and the opposition. However, with the exception of Western sanctions, none of these actions have materialized.

Meanwhile, Russia has been working on its own solution to Belarus, which is to support Lukashenko or identify another candidate who suits Moscow's political objectives. If this fails, it is not out of the question that Russia will try to maintain influence over Minsk using other instruments, including the military. Since September 2020, **1,000** men from Russia's airborne forces have conducted joint exercises with Belarusian forces in Belarus, with Putin and Lukashenko promising unprecedented monthly exercises in the future. Russia's annual military district exercise in 2021 occurs in its western military district (or Zapad), which could mean tens of thousands of Russian forces exercising in Belarus and Russia in September. In addition, construction for a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus has already **begun**.

However, the gradual integration of Belarus into Russia is more likely than territorial annexation or direct military occupation because Russia is an "economizing power," as Josef Joffe **puts it**. A gradual annexation might avoid international condemnation and additional sanctions. Furthermore, the agreement **signed** between Moscow and Minsk on September 3, 2019, on economic and political integration between the two countries is a perfect legal framework for gradual annexation. It provides for a common fiscal and macroeconomic policy; a single regulator for gas, oil, and electricity; and harmonization of their civil codes and banking systems. Moreover, the Kremlin is cognizant that outright annexation or military occupation could risk losing the support of the Belarusian people culturally, linguistically, and socially, as happened in Ukraine.

The civic awakening in Belarus reflects the weakening of Russian influence in its zone of "privileged interest," but it also reveals how the Kremlin is attempting to adapt to the new circumstances.

Countering Russia's Westpolitik

Russia's Westpolitik policy has significantly impacted Russia's relationship with the European Union, as Russia's annexation of Crimea, its military intervention in eastern Ukraine, and its insistence on the right to act on behalf of Russian-speaking populations outside its own borders have increased tensions. From 1991 to 2014, the European Union considered Russia a "strategic partner"; in 2010, it even sought a "partnership for modernization" with Russia as the European Union enhanced its bilateral relations with the six post-Soviet countries in its Eastern Partnership. However, since 2016, managing the European Union's relationship with Russia has **represented** "a key strategic challenge" for the bloc.

The European Union has always struggled to craft a cohesive policy toward Russia. While EU countries share democratic and liberal values, they do not necessarily share geopolitical and economic interests, or wish to sacrifice them. Since the annexation of Crimea, the European Union has made several efforts to redefine and reformulate relations with Russia. In 2014, it adopted economic, financial, and diplomatic sanctions against Russia, which have since been renewed every six months. Two years later, the European Union presented **five guiding principles** for its relationship with Russia: (1) full implementation of the Minsk II ceasefire agreement designed to end the war in the Donbas as a precondition for any change in EU policy; (2) an increase in ties with Russia's neighbors; (3) a strengthening of the European Union's resilience, and that of its neighbors, against Russian threats; (4) selective engagement with Russia on foreign policy issues vital to the European Union; and (5) a boosting of people-to-people contacts and support of Russian civil society.

Yet relations have continued to deteriorate. In 2018, member countries **expelled** Russian diplomats in solidarity with the United Kingdom, where Sergey and Yulia Skripal had been poisoned. In March 2019,

the European Parliament **declared** that “Russia is not a strategic partner” and that there would never be a return to business *as usual* with Russia. In September 2020, the European Parliament **adopted** a resolution condemning the poisoning of Alexey Navalny, and in January 2021, it adopted a **second resolution** following the latter’s imprisonment and called on the European Union and its member states to develop a new strategy for its relations with Russia, **focused** on strengthening civil society and the rule of law and on reviewing its existing cooperation with Russia on foreign policy issues and projects such as Nord Stream 2. In his speech on April 28, 2021, Josep Borrell **pointed out** that “we are going to face a long and difficult period of political confrontation with Russia, and we must prepare for that.” Borrell proposed an EU strategy for Russia summarized as “push back, contain, and engage,” an encapsulation of the five principles articulated in 2016.

Unfortunately, these principles **do not form** a coherent policy, and it would be difficult to claim that they have been consistently and effectively applied in the past few years. The European Union’s strongest response to Russia’s Westpolitik policy has been the creation of an institutional mechanism—the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2003 and, within its framework, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009—to strengthen political and economic ties with the former Soviet republics. The main objective of the European Union in EaP countries is to support the development of democracy and the gradual integration of these republics into the European market. The instruments for achieving this goal are financial aid, political advice, and support for civil society. The success of this policy has been mixed: Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have **signed** the Association and Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the European Union, while Belarus and Armenia are members of the Economic Eurasian Union. Azerbaijan is not a member of either of these two blocs.

The European Union has always struggled to craft a cohesive policy toward Russia. While EU countries share democratic and liberal values, they do not necessarily share geopolitical and economic interests, or wish to sacrifice them.

Both the EaP and ENP, as well as the second principle of the EU declaration of 2016, reflect a European decision to compete with Russia in the region and refute the notion of a Russian zone of privileged interest. This means that the in-between states will remain the main arena of geopolitical contestation between Europe and Russia for the foreseeable future, with unknown results. There will be a combination of EU support and Russian economic and political coercion as these states struggle to free themselves from Russian energy dependence, influence, and corruption while attempting to reform. The global pandemic and economic shockwaves only **increase** the unpredictability.

Conclusion: The Future Is No Longer as It Was

At the heart of the contestation between the European Union and Russia is the incompatibility of the way they understand the sovereignty of the in-between states. While the European Union supports their

democratic transition and is willing to strengthen their democratic resilience to escape Russia's malign influence, the Kremlin recognizes only their limited sovereignty, because they are part of Moscow's "zone of privileged interest." The interests of Brussels and Moscow are opposed and incompatible.

Although the West does not recognize Russia's right to have its zones of influence in the post-Soviet space, it has shown that it will not go to war over them. This has resulted in a series of "frozen conflicts" along Russia's periphery that have become buffer zones of deprivation and illegality. Both sides have accepted an unacceptable post-Cold War settlement.

Because the Kremlin views political rivalry as the *kto kavo* principle (who dominates whom) and understands national security as "defensive expansion," the European Union must prepare itself for an increasingly difficult relationship with Russia. The European Union must strengthen its democratic resilience and must have a clear and realistic strategy toward its eastern neighbor as the Kremlin treads a path of self-isolation. Russia's internal limitations—the political and economic system based on clientelism and corruption, demographic problems, and the inability to transform its own economy without seeking great accommodation with the West—will gradually weaken its ability to act in its neighborhood but may also embolden its policies to counter this perception. ■

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