REDEMOS

RECONFIGURING EU DEMOCRACY SUPPORT. TOWARDS A SUSTAINED DEMOS IN THE EU'S EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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The role of Russia in the political transition of the EU's eastern neighbourhood

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Executive Summary

The Russian political establishment has always been convinced that Russia's national interests as a “great power” extend beyond its borders and that the post-Soviet space is a territory of Russia’s exclusive geopolitical domination. Moscow, therefore, immediately characterized the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative as a project aimed to project the EU's soft power onto its neighbouring countries and reduce their dependence on Russian influence.

The central aim of Russia's strategy concerning the EU’s eastern neighborhood (EN) countries is the erosion of their sovereignty and the attainment of de facto control over decision-making in their external and internal affairs. Moreover, the Kremlin is clearly focused on undermining the attractive image of the EU – and the West as a whole – among the populations of the EN countries. To accomplish its goals, the Kremlin most often resort to information warfare (or soft influence through the Russian media presence in the EN countries and the promotion of narratives through institutions such as *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation), economic blackmail, and hard power. In pursuit of its foreign policy objectives, Russia employs an extensive array of instruments, weaponising virtually all forms of interaction with neighbouring countries. The Kremlin relies on instruments of negative motivation, such as fostering separatism, exploiting hard security vulnerabilities, employing economic coercion, and engaging in nuclear sabre-rattling.

A thorough examination, conducted in the framework of this policy paper, suggests that the Kremlin's overarching strategy and tactical manoeuvres are unlikely to undergo substantial alterations, particularly in the medium term, as they are deeply rooted in the peculiarities of the institutional design of Russian society, politics, and economy. Drawing from the analysis and with the goal of effectively mitigating Russia's influence in the EN space, this policy paper recommends promoting Europe as a security provider; advancing new strategic messaging; and adopting the principles of no grey zones in Europe and zero tolerance towards Russian propaganda. In certain parts, this research extends beyond REDEMOS’ chronological scope to highlight and emphasize the continuity of Russia's foreign policy towards its neighbours since the collapse of the USSR.

List of Terms and Abbreviations

CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EN	Eastern Neighbourhood
EU	European Union
IRA	Internet Research Agency
LDPR	Liberal Democratic Party of Russia
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
RtP	Responsibility to Protect
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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1 Key Factors of Russia's Foreign Policy

An integral part of the worldview of the post-Soviet Russian political establishment, regardless of political orientation, has always been the conviction that Russia's national interests as a "great power" extend far beyond its borders and that the post-Soviet space is a territory of Russia's exclusive geopolitical domination. The "near abroad" — or "immediate geopolitical neighbourhood" as it is also called — has been viewed by Russian politicians as Moscow's "sphere of special interests." Throughout the past 30 years, in all the Russian documents outlining foreign policy strategy, the "near abroad" has consistently been recognized as the utmost priority. The independence and sovereignty of the countries within this sphere were considered if not a historical error, then certainly a temporary phenomenon. Any bilateral interaction they had with other external actors without Russia's decisive involvement was perceived by the Kremlin with extreme jealousy. For example, Ukraine's accession to the Council of Europe in late 1995, i.e. a couple of months earlier than Russia, was interpreted by Russian politicians as the West's attempt to weaken Russian influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Put differently, Russia's foreign policy strategy has been aimed to maintain its preponderance over the post-Soviet states and prevent the development of their ties with the West. To achieve it, both the Kremlin advisers and the official foreign policy doctrines suggested employing a wide array of tools ranging from imposing political-economic isolation on the near abroad countries and thus undermining their economic independence to the use of military force for the sake of "durable neighbourliness."[1]

The Kremlin interpreted the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative in a similar vein. Immediately upon its inception, senior Russian officials characterized it as an "anti-Russian project," aimed at, among other things, "detaching post-Soviet countries from Russia" and removing them from the Kremlin's influence. Later, the State Duma of the Russian Federation claimed that behind the EaP allegedly lurked the "neo-imperial ambitions" of the EU and its desire to expand the "zone of its exclusive interests."

There are four key factors that determined this particular perception of the post-Soviet space and the corresponding foreign policy strategy of Russia.

The first factor stems from the enduring impact of the lengthy Soviet rule on Russian society, manifesting as a **post-imperial syndrome**. Against the backdrop of widespread frustration with the transition to a market economy and the prevalence of nostalgia for the "era of stability" among the general population, the ruling elites lacked the political will to reassess the dark pages of the past and radically reformat their foreign policy orientation. The inertia of old Soviet thinking has always been particularly strong among the older generation of Russians, and a conformist attitude towards the authorities' messages fuelled a demand for foreign policy in a neo-imperial style. For instance, according to a survey conducted in April 1992, only 16% of Russians believed that Russia should follow the path of Western developed countries,[2] while the absolute majority of Russians still regretted the dissolution of the USSR.[3]

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[1] "Osnovnye polozheniya koncepcii vneshnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii," 23 April 1993, Tatiana Shakleina (sost.), *Vneshnjaja politika i bezopasnost' sovremennoj Rossii 1991-2002*, vol. 4, Moscow: INO-Tsentr, 2002, 19-50.
[2] Yuri A. Levada (ed.), *Sovetskij prostoj chelovek: Opyt social'nogo portreta na rubezhe 90-h,* Moscow: Mirovoj Okean, 1993, 15.
[3] VTsIOM. "100 let SSSR: zabyt' nel'zia vernut'sia?," 30 December 2022, https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/100-let-sssr-zabyt-nelzja-vernutsja.

It is not surprising that confrontational rhetoric towards the West and the assertion of territorial claims to former Soviet republics proved to be a reliable means of scoring political points. Politicians who exploited neo-imperial narratives to the maximum quickly gained popularity among the people and achieved rapid career advancements. In other words, the exploitation of the post-imperial syndrome has always been an easy way to legitimize power. All Russian presidents have consistently opted for the most straightforward means of legitimising their authority, employing the exploitation of socio-cultural stereotypes, and cultivating an image of a besieged fortress. This approach has been accompanied by the proclamation of great-power slogans and the use of adversarial rhetoric directed towards the West, which has resonated favourably with the Russian electorate. Even the most liberal Russian intellectuals considered Russia's dominance in the post-Soviet space to be inevitable and saw the resurgence of a great Russia as a civilized and neo-colonial "metropolis with a human face."[4]

The second factor was the absence of changes in the **qualitative composition of Russian elites**, which further entrenched revanchist trends in foreign policy. From the very beginning of post-Soviet Russia, for a significant portion of the elite and top bureaucracy, over 80% of whom were members of the Communist Party (CPSU) and retained their positions in the power structure, maintaining the status of a great power and securing a special place in the international system seemed to be a *natural* priority of Russia's foreign policy.[5] In their worldview, the United States was perceived as a "pole" competing with Russia for regional and global influence. Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev openly acknowledged that while the West was not an enemy of Russia, such a view was not part of the Russian societal mindset and was entirely unacceptable for those affiliated with the bureaucracy and the military-industrial complex.[6]

The decision-makers in Russia viewed the West only as the epitome of economic progress and development, yet not the role model for institutional and political design. In this sense, they sympathized with the Chinese approach, in which elements of the market economy coexisted with the absence of public political competition.

The third factor was Russia's role as a **major supplier of fossil fuels to the EN countries.** Analysts have long observed a stable correlation between the cost of Russian gas supplies and the extent to which the foreign policy activities of the importing country align with the expectations of the Kremlin, which is especially true for the post-Soviet states.[7] After the collapse of the USSR, many countries in the region inherited large industrial enterprises and power stations, the operative sustainability of which was heavily dependent on the supply of cheap energy resources from Russia. The Kremlin consistently sought to leverage EN countries' dependence by offering lower prices for its energy resources in exchange for geopolitical loyalty, which many considered to be a dangerous manifestation of Russia's neo-imperialist policy.[8]

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[4] Mikhail Shevelev, "Za nashu i vashu metropoliju," *Moskovskie novosti*, 26 January 1992, 8.
[5] Nikolaj Popov, "Vneshnepoliticheskaja jelita i vneshnjaja politika," *Ekonomicheskie i social'nye peremeny: monitoring obshhestvennogo mnenija*, 1994, no. 1: 32-34.
[6] Andrei Kozyrev, "Russia: A Chance For Survival," *Foreign Affairs*, 1992, vol. 71, no. 2: 1-13.
[7] Robert L. Larsson. *Russia's Energy Policy: Security Dimensions and Russia's Reliability as an Energy Supplier* (Scientific Report. Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2006), 4, 262, https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--1934--SE; Glenn Kates, Li Luo. "Russian Gas: How Much Is That?," *RFE/RL*, 1 July 2014, https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-gas-how-much-gazprom/25442003.html.
[8] Vladimir Milov, "Russia ill-equipped to lead on global security," *Financial Times*, 24 January 2006, https://www.ft.com/content/eeb4cda8-8d0e-11da-9daf-0000779e2340.

The fourth factor is the endemic **deficit of leadership and comprehensive strategy towards the eastern neighbourhood space and Russia on the side of Western countries**. This essence is well reflected in the words once uttered by the then US ambassador to Russia, John Beyrle: “A weak Russia is the scariest nightmare for the United States.”[9] Put simply, the West still lacks a consolidated answer to the question of what to do with a nuclear state that has veto power in the UN Security Council and constantly violates the norms of international law. This was well demonstrated in the mid-1980s when the economic decline of the Soviet superpower posed huge risks to global security, the primary one in the perception of Western elites being the loss of centralized control by Moscow over its nuclear potential. Since then, Berlin, Paris, and Washington have done everything to prevent radical political destabilization in Russia. The Kremlin has cynically exploited this concern in its favour, seeking to sell the West the threat of a major nuclear war at a high price.

In this regard, Vladimir Putin has learned the lessons from his predecessors. He regularly brandishes strategic nuclear weapons not only to demonstrate past greatness to the generation of Russians educated in Soviet traditions but also to prevent the consolidation of Western efforts to counter Russia's aggressive foreign policy towards neighbouring countries. Putin's mention of the nuclear triad has a paralyzing effect on some Western experts and politicians, who are ready to rely on the unproven recipe of peace from the Cold War era (now sold as the cold peace scenario), which involves building relations with Russia at the expense of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of “in-between states.”[10] Such Western reaction actually reinforces the Kremlin's confidence that its strategic goals are ultimately justified and will be achieved.

Consequently, the inertia of Russia's sociocultural development, along with the specific understanding of political expediency by its political elites, shapes the content of Russia’s foreign policy, particularly towards neighbouring countries. Importantly, the Russian establishment views international politics through the lens of Cold War-era concepts. Vladimir Putin and his entourage perceive the collapse of the Soviet Union not as an opportunity to become a normal democracy, but as the USSR's defeat and, consequently, the West's victory. Small and medium-sized states are seen by the Kremlin as inherently dependent objects of influence for major players, while the EN is regarded as a space of Russia's “special responsibility” and a key aspect of its great power status. In other words, Russia has adopted the old Soviet paradigm of “limited sovereignty”, openly denying the right of EN countries to independently choose their foreign policy course.[11]

Regardless of the degree of development of their democratic institutions, the Kremlin favours more those EN countries that demonstrate outright loyalty, do not challenge Russian geopolitical dominance, and align themselves against the Western world. Conversely, Russia seeks to create as many problems as possible for governments openly inclined toward integration with the EU and NATO, later offering pre-prepared solutions in exchange for geopolitical concessions. In countries where there is room for political competition and media freedom, Russia increases pressure on defiant elites by creating or financing pro-Russian political parties and establishing media outlets to promote and amplify anti-Western narratives.

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[9] *Kommersant*, 3 October 2011.

[10] Samuel Charap, Jeremy Shapiro et al, *A Consensus Proposal for a Revised Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia* (RAND Corporation, 2019); Samuel Charap, Miranda Priebe, *Planning for the Aftermath Assessing Options for U.S. Strategy Toward Russia After the Ukraine War* (RAND Corporation, 2024), 65-71.

[11] Igor Gretskiy, “Lukyanov Doctrine: Conceptual Origins of Russia's Hybrid Foreign Policy—The Case of Ukraine”, *Saint Louis University Law Journal*, vol. 64, no. 1, (2020): 1-21.

Put differently, Russia does not promote any particular state model, whether democracy or authoritarianism, and it has no appealing model of political or economic development to export. Essentially, all Kremlin-led quasi-integration projects were not aimed at creating a competitive reginal economic integration project but at institutionalizing the economic and security dependence of neighbouring states on Russia. Instead, Russia seeks to discredit the West as an attractive model of socio-political and economic development, and the EU in particular as the most successful case of economic and political integration. To achieve this goal, Russia exploits vulnerabilities and conflict-prone issues in any society, whether its political system is authoritarian or democratic. To implement its strategy, Russia employs a variety of instruments that include among others information warfare[12] and the tools of "negative motivation", which will be discussed below.

2 Information Warfare

It would be no exaggeration to assert that the Russian government operates on the assumption that geopolitical battles are won not by those with greater economic potential and higher GDP per capita, but by those who seize the initiative in the information space and succeed in imposing their worldview on their adversaries. The Kremlin seemingly believes that any government, except for completely isolated dictatorships, relies to certain extent on public sentiment to legitimise its authority. Hence, the strategic thinking of the Russian elites assumes that the population of any country is an object of manipulation, through which they can influence decision-makers who are very much dependent on public opinion. Simply put, the Kremlin's priority is to "reformat public consciousness" in the countries targeted by Russian influence, employing a broad array of tools, including fomenting societal divisions through the dissemination of contradictory and provocative information.[13]

A special role in promoting Russian narratives is assigned by the Kremlin to the extensive Russian-speaking communities in the E countries. It is no coincidence that the Russian language is recognized by the Russian government as a tool for "expanding Russian presence in the international arena," primarily in the CIS and "countries historically linked with Russia."[14]

The range of foreign policy instruments employed by Russia to achieve its strategic objectives is extensive.[15] Therefore, we will focus on the Russian media presence in the EaP countries, and the promotion of narratives through institutions such as *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation.

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[12] Sometimes, experts also define it as a part of Russia's "*counter-normative power.*" See: Andrey Makarychev, "Russia's neighbourhood policy: Conflictual contexts and factors of change," in Kristi Raik and Sinikukka Saari (eds.), *Key Actors in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood Competing perspectives on geostrategic tensions*, *FIIA Report 47* (FIIA, 2016), 42.

[13] Federation Council, "Stenogramma parlamentskih slushanij na temu Politiko-pravovye aspekty protivodejstviya reabilitacii nacizma, geroizacii nacistskih prestupnikov i ih posobnikov: sravnitel'nyj analiz i uroki na budushchee," 23 April 2015, http://council.gov.ru/media/files/41d5547f74e293d55554.pdf.

[14] The President of Russia, "Koncepciya gosudarstvennoj podderzhki i prodvizheniya russkogo yazyka za rubezhom [The concept of state support and promotion of the Russian language abroad]," 3 November 2015, http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/50644.

[15] For more see: Jakub Olchowski, "How To Weaponise Information: Russian Patterns," in Agnieszka Legucka and Robert Kupiecki (eds.), *Disinformation, Narratives and Memory Politics in Russia and Belarus* (London, NY: Routledge, 2024),. 59-71.

2.1 Russian TV Broadcasting

The Kremlin attaches paramount importance to disseminating its narratives in the information environment of adjacent countries and globally. Until the late 1990s, many post-Soviet countries had their own national television channels that gradually displaced Russian media content, which had dominantly shaped the information environment. However, with Vladimir Putin's coming to power, Russia aggressively sought access to television audiences in the post-Soviet space, especially where the presence of the Russian language was significant. In the early 2000s, a new Foreign Policy Concept was adopted, setting the goal for the "accelerated development in Russia of effective means of informational influence on public opinion abroad."[16] From that point on, international versions of Russian channels (such as ORT International in 2000, RTR-Planeta and NTV Mir in 2003, TV Tsentr International in 2005, and others) and radio stations (such as Russkoye Radio in 2001) began broadcasting to the post-Soviet space.

In the Russian media, post-Soviet countries that decided to distance themselves from the Kremlin and pursue European integration were portrayed as hostages of their corrupt elites, and their sovereignty was constantly called into question. Meanwhile, the West was framed as a declining civilization that, by spreading chaos and instability, seeks to hinder the development of emerging centres of power like China and a resurgent Russia. Russian official narratives justified Moscow's claims to special geopolitical status and dominance in the EN space by emphasizing the long common history between Russia and the post-Soviet states.

For instance, Russian propaganda presented post-Orange Revolution Ukraine as Russia's "southern province," which the West wants to control in order to use it as a launching pad for exporting colour revolutions to Russia.[17] After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the new Ukrainian government suspended the broadcasting of five Russian news channels. The list of prohibited Russian channels expanded over the following years and reached 74 by 2019. In 2021, three channels indirectly controlled by Vladimir Putin's close associate Viktor Medvedchuk were disconnected from broadcasting in Ukraine.

Following the rise to power of the opposition led by Mikheil Saakashvili in 2003, Russian government-controlled media characterised Georgia as a country sliding into dictatorship, claiming that closer ties with the West would bring no economic benefits but would only worsen its already tense relations with Moscow.[18] After the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, cable networks in Georgia suspended the broadcasting of Russian news channels, and access to Russian websites was cut off due to malign propaganda and bias in covering the hostilities. However, with the advent of Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream party to power in 2012, the new government lifted all restrictions. Although the opposition repeatedly and unsuccessfully attempted to reinstate the ban, it was only after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that Georgian operators voluntarily stopped retransmitting Russian news channels.

In Moldova, in 2018, the pro-European parliamentary coalition adopted amendments to the Broadcasting Code, prohibiting the transmission of news, analytical, military, and political programs and talk shows produced in countries that did not sign the European Convention on Transfrontier Television. Russia, which signed the document in 2006 but did not ratify it, is among these countries. However, two years later, the

[16] "Koncepcija vneshnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii [Russia' Foreign Policy Concept]," *Nezavisimaja gazeta*, 17 July 2000, https://www.ng.ru/world/2000-07-11/1_concept.html
[17] Pervyi kanal, "News" with Piotr Tolstoy, 25 March 2007; Rossija TV, "Spetsial'nyi korrespondent", 25 November 2007.
[18] Aleksei Morozov, Aleksei Chichkin, "Pochemu Gruziya pokhozha na Haiti?", Rossiyskaya gazeta, 19 May 2009 / https://rg.ru/2009/05/19/gruziya-gaiti-site-anons.html.

new composition of the Parliament, where the pro-Russian Party of Socialists, dominated under then-President Igor Dodon, significantly expanded the use of the Russian language and lifted this ban.[19] After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moldova's Emergency Situations Commission decided to suspend licenses for broadcasting six Russian TV channels, accusing them of "spreading incorrect information about events in the country and the war in Ukraine." In Armenia, restrictions on the broadcast of Russian news channels were discussed in 2019, 2020, and 2023, but no decisions have been made. At the same time, Russian TV has almost complete access to the Belarusian audience.

2.2 Social Networks and Troll Factories

The initial efforts of institutionalised and systematic interaction between the Russian government and the blogosphere trace back to 2009, when the Presidential Administration invited Rustem Adagamov, the most popular blogger within the Russian-speaking LiveJournal community at that time, to cover President Dmitry Medvedev's official meeting in the Kremlin with his counterpart from India.[20] After his return to the presidency in 2012, known as the "castling,"[21] Vladimir Putin began to underscore the Internet and social media platforms' role as potentially influential tools not only in domestic affairs but also in international politics.[22] It is from this moment onwards that the Kremlin has started systematically using them to spread disinformation through digital media and social networks.

In 2012, the Presidential Administration commissioned a survey of the "demand for news, political, and economic information among subscribers of Facebook and Twitter."[23] The findings indicated a significant popular interest in political topics and a rapid dissemination of information among the audience of social networks.[24] At least since 2013, a St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA), owned by Vladimir Putin's former chef Evgeny Prigozhin, started its malign activities aimed at distorting both domestic and international public opinion.[25] This entity — also referred to as the "troll factory" — generated numerous unverified accounts on social networks and online media outlets, disseminating false information about "unfriendly countries" while promoting official Kremlin narratives. Prior to and during the annexation of Crimea in 2014, like other Russian media outlets, "Prigozhin's trolls" vilified the Euromaidan activists, fuelling fear and panic within the Ukrainian society.[26]

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[19] Parliament of the Republic of Moldova. *Lege pentru modificarea Codului serviciilor media audiovizuale al Republicii Moldova nr. 174/2018*, 16 December 2020, https://www.parlament.md/ProcesulLegislativ/Proiectedeactenormative/tabid/61/LegislativId/5315/language/ro-RO/Default.aspx.

[20] "Blogera *drugoi* pozvali v Kreml," *BFM*, 4 September 2009, https://www.bfm.ru/news/29018.

[21] Charles Clover, Catherine Belton, "I will transmit this to Vladimir", Financial Times, 5 May 2012 / https://www.ft.com/content/4fc908b6-94ba-11e1-bb0d-00144feab49a.

[22] Government of the Russian Federation, "Stat'ja Predsedatelja Pravitel'stva Rossii V.V.Putina v gazete 'Moskovskie novosti," 27 February 2012, http://archive.premier.gov.ru/events/news/18252.

[23] Administration of the President of Russia, "Plan-grafik razmeshhenija zakazov na postavki tovarov, vypolnenie rabot, okazanie uslug dlja nuzhd zakazchikov na 2012 god," 26 September 2012, 15, https://udprf.ru/plan-grafik.

[24] Alyona Sivkova, "Kreml' delaiet stavku na blogerov," *Izvestia*, 30 July 2013, https://iz.ru/news/554517.

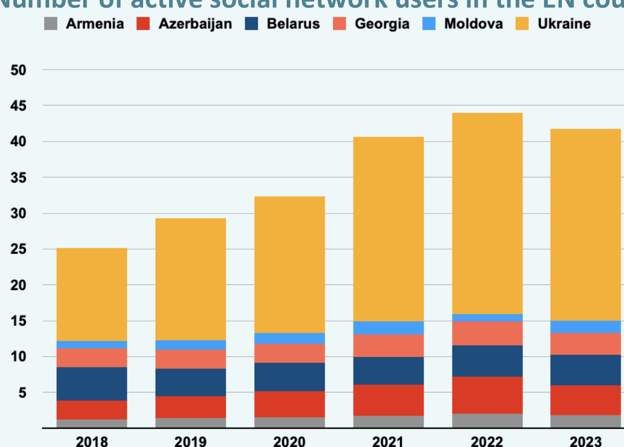
[25] "Press-sluzhba Prigozhina," Telegram, 14 February 2023, https://t.me/concordgroup_official/441; Aleksandra Garmazhapova, "Gde zhivut trolli. I kto ikh kormit," *Novaya gazeta*, 7 September 2013, https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2013/09/07/56253-gde-zhivut-trolli-i-kto-ih-kormit.

[26] Peter Pomerantsev, *This is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

Over time, the activities of the troll factory only escalated, and by 2018, prosecutor Robert Mueller had accused the IRA of interfering in the 2016 American presidential elections. As of March 2023, the IRA's estimated budget amounted to approximately USD 12.3 million, with a workforce of 400 employees, 40 of whom were exclusively dedicated to the Ukrainian media segment.[27] Even after the death of Evgeny Prigozhin, his trolls have remained active on global social networks.[28]

Over the past couple of years, mainly due to the significant population outflow from Ukraine, the number of active social media users in the EaP space region has decreased by 5% (Figure 1). However, social networks are increasingly becoming the primary means of consuming informational content. Therefore, it is unlikely that, in the near future, we can expect a reduction in the activity of Russian trolls hiding behind thousands of anonymous accounts and generating millions of posts in an attempt to deceive and exploit their potential victims.

Figure 1: Number of active social network users in the EN countries, mln.



Source: DataReportal, annual country reports, 2018-2023.

2.3 Rossotrudnichestvo

The Russian political establishment has always perceived the Russian language and culture as a practical means to project its power onto the post-Soviet states. However, only after the 2004 Ukraine's Orange Revolution, which Vladimir Putin perceived as a significant threat to his political regime, did the Russian authorities begin to place increasing attention on this topic. In 2005, the Russian Foreign Ministry established the Department for Work with Compatriots Abroad to try to consolidate 30 millions of Russians living abroad, over half of whom resided in the post-Soviet countries. Three years later, the Russian Centre for International Scientific and Cultural Cooperation (*Roszarubezhcentr*), which had been considered a sinecure for retired diplomats and politicians, was abolished. Its functions were transferred to the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, which since 2008 has been operating under the abbreviated name *Rossotrudnichestvo*.

The reform was envisioned by its proponents to establish a powerful organization modelled after USAID, intended to serve as the primary vehicle for Russian soft power, particularly through informational influence

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[27] "Kibervoiska Prigozhina," *Dossier*, 18 March 2023, https://dossier.center/prig-it.

[28] Dustin Volz, "Prigozhin Is Dead, but His Troll Farms Are Alive and Peddling Disinformation," *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 March 2024, https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/prigozhin-is-dead-but-his-troll-farms-are-alive-and-peddling-disinformation-e25c4441.

on foreign audiences. The government sought to boost the agency's budget by reallocating funds previously used for providing humanitarian aid to third countries in a multilateral format towards bilateral projects. This approach not only allowed for the concentration of resources in the Kremlin's priority areas but also aimed to enhance the PR impact.[29] The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs expected that the reformed agency — being one of the main instruments of Russia's soft power — would mostly focus on promoting Russian narratives within the host countries' societies by organizing various thematic events, thereby creating "an atmosphere of a different vision and a different attitude towards events that might be of concern." [30]

Meanwhile, the transformations initiated in 2008 dragged on and failed to improve the effectiveness of Rossotrudnichestvo in subsequent years. Another attempt to fundamentally change the agency was made in 2020 when Evgeny Primakov was appointed as its head. He immediately announced a new ambitious reform, which aimed to rebrand the agency's name, significantly alter its organisational structure, and redistribute resources in favour of the CIS as the top priority region.[31] However, it seems that no significant outcomes followed this initiative. Moreover, the agency's propaganda efforts faced serious opposition from both the EU and some EaP countries. For example, in April 2021, Ukraine banned the activities of Rossotrudnichestvo branches on its territory, and after Russia's invasion in 2022, the European Union imposed sanctions against it.[32]

2.4 Promoting Russkiy Mir

The Russkiy Mir Foundation was created in 2007 to promote the Russian language and culture. At that time, around 80 offices of the Rossotrudnichestvo had already been engaged in promoting the Russian language. In fact, this new structure was intended to perform similar functions — i.e. to actively improve Russia's image in global media by spreading "objective information" and to consolidate "Russian compatriots" abroad, that is, those who "feel their belonging to [Russia] through language, culture, and religion."[33] But unlike the Rossotrudnichestvo agency, the Russkiy Mir Foundation was established as a non-profit public organisation, enabling it to camouflage its activities as non-political.[34]

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[29] Elena Chernenko, "Miagkuiu silu snabzhaiut sredstvami," *Kommersant*, 5 June 2013, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2204815.

[30] The Federation Council, "Kruglyj stol na temu Voprosy protivodejstviya antirossijskim istoricheskim koncepciyam v ryade stran Evrazii [Round table on the Issues of countering anti-Russian historical concepts in some Eurasian countries]," 17 December 2015, http://council.gov.ru/activity/activities/roundtables/65567.

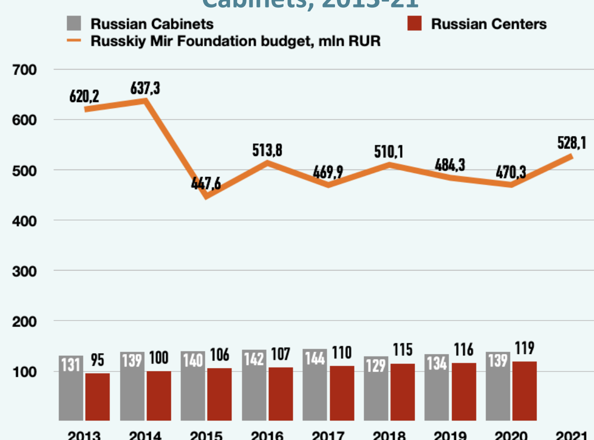
[31] "Primakov anonsiroval izmenenija v Rossotrudnichestve," *Izvestia*, 5 November 2020, https://iz.ru/1083223/2020-11-05/primakov-anonsiroval-izmeneniia-v-rossotrudnichestve.

[32] Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/1270, 21 July 2022, OJ L 193, 21.7.2022, 187.

[33] "Interv'ju s Viacheslavom Nikonovym," *Ekho Moskvy*, 25 June 2007, https://web.archive.org/web/20070817212933/http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/razvorot/52774.

[34] Russkiy Mir Foundation, "Nam vsem pora vernut'sia k istokam – na svoiu dukhovnuiu rodinu," 3 November 2017, https://russkiymir.ru/publications/232934.

Figure 2: The Russkiy Mir Foundation's budget, number of functioning Russian Centers and Russian Cabinets, 2013-21



Sources: *Russia's Ministry of Justice; Russkiy Mir Foundation annual reports*

The Foundation swiftly opened its offices at educational institutions and libraries worldwide. By the year 2020, it had 119 active Russian Centres and 139 Russian Cabinets all over the world. A significant part of them were located in post-Soviet countries; the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) focused its activities primarily on working with the younger generation of "Russian compatriots" to preserve their "Russian cultural code" that supposedly would help "convey the truth about Russia" to their countries of residence.[35] According to the data provided on the foundation's website, there are currently more than 120 Russian Cabinets and 73 Russian Centres functioning outside the borders of Russia. Since 2023, the Russkiy Mir Foundation has been subjected to sanctions by the EU, Ukraine, Canada, and Switzerland. Nevertheless, its branches continue their regular activities in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, and Moldova, as well as on the Georgian and Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia.

Since 2022, the concept of *Russkiy Mir* underwent substantial revisions, with a pronounced shift towards prioritising loyalty to the Russian state and further relegating self-identification with the Russian culture to a peripheral role. As Konstantin Zatulin, the first deputy chairman of the State Duma Committee on CIS Affairs, Eurasian Integration, and Relations with Compatriots, stated, "Those who oppose the Russian world today are opponents of the Russian state."[36] Essentially, the Russian government views an adherent of the Russkiy Mir not so much as someone proficient in the Russian language and literature, but rather as one who faithfully serves Kremlin interests. This metamorphosis is also noticeable in the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, highlighting the need to unite compatriots "constructively disposed toward Russia."[37] It is apparent that the Kremlin had this aim in mind when establishing the International Russophile Movement in the same year.[38]

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[35] MFA of the Russian Federation, "Vystuplenie otvetstvennogo sekretarja Pravitel'stvennoj komissii po delam sootechestvennikov za rubezhom, direktora Departamenta po rabote s sootechestvennikami za rubezhom MID Rossii O.S.Mal'ginova na parlamentskih slushanijah 'O sovremennoj politike Rossijskoj Federacii v otnoshenii sootechestvennikov, prozhivajushhih za rubezhom," 20 March 2017, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1544173.

[36] Konstantin Zatulin, "Doklad na Vserossijskoj nauchno-prakticheskoj konferencii 'Rossija: edinstvo i mnogoobrazie," 16-17 November 2023, https://zatulin.ru/konstantin-zatulin-vystupil-s-dokladom-russkij-mir-vyzovy-i-ugrozy-v-mgimo-mid-rf.

[37] MFA of the Russian Federation, "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," 31 March 2023, https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586.

[38] MFA of the Russian Federation, "Vystuplenie Ministra inostrannyh del Rossijskoj Federacii S.V.Lavrova na otkrytii uchreditel'nogo kongressa Mezhdunarodnogo dvizhenija rusofilov," 14 March 2023, https://mid.ru/ru/press_service/minister_speeches/1857933.

Its principal task is to muffle and discredit any criticism of Russia's aggressive behaviour under the guise of "combatting Russophobia."

3 Economic Blackmail and Coercion

In the early 1990s, in all EN countries except Belarus, a rapid transition from a command-administrative economic model to a market-oriented one began. However, it quickly became apparent that large Soviet-era enterprises with outdated equipment were unable to compete freely without massive state subsidies and were persistently unprofitable. In most cases, the economic performance depended on essentially unreplaceable supplies of energy resources from Russia. A significant portion of imports from neighbouring countries to Russia consisted of oil and natural gas, and the supplies had no alternative. These were critically important for the resource-intensive energy infrastructure and industrial enterprises, many of which were unprofitable.

In other words, the payment capacity of the newly independent states was very limited, so they sought agreements with Russia on preferential prices for energy resources, barter schemes in mutual trade, or cash loans. Hence, the export of hydrocarbons emerged as Russia's extremely powerful tool to expand control over its neighbours.[39] All of this formed the basis for Moscow to justify its right to a sphere of influence. For instance, Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev believed that since Russia bore the main burden of providing cheap energy resources and loans, the West should recognize the "special role and responsibility of Russia within the former USSR."[40]

Until the early 2000s, the Kremlin allowed customers to settle their debts through barter schemes or negotiated repayments through the acquisition of valuable assets in various sectors of the economy. For instance, in 1994, Russia acquired stakes in major Armenian state enterprises (ArmEnergoMash and Nairit) through this scheme. In 2002, another wave of similar type takeovers followed, including Mars CJSC, Scientific Research and Production Enterprise of Materials Science, the Yerevan Research Institute of Mathematical Machines, and the Yerevan Research Institute of Automated Control Systems, as well as some premises of the Hrazdan Thermal Power Plant.[41] All those assets eventually became Russian property in the settlement of Armenia's debt for energy resource supplies.

Russia extensively used this approach in relations with other EN countries. In 1994, according to Russia's estimates, Moldova's debt for gas supplies amounted to USD 250 million, and Gazprom threatened Chişinău to suspend gas deliveries.[42] The conflict was resolved when the Moldovan government agreed to create a joint company with Gazprom for gas transportation and to transfer state-owned assets to settle the debt.[43] Subsequently, the Kremlin, without the explicit consent of the Moldovan government, created a scheme for supplying gas to the separatist region of Transnistria, which was also used by the Cuciurgan power station to generate a significant part of the electricity consumed in Moldova. Despite the fact that the Moldovan

[39] Kalev Stoicescu, *Russia's 'Allies'* (ICDS Report, 1 February 2018), 31, https://icds.ee/en/russias-allies.
[40] Andrey Kozyrev, "Strategiia partniorstva," *Mezhdunarodnaia zhuzn'* no. 5 (1994): 5-15.
[41] Government of the Russian Federation, "Resolution no. 795, 2 November 2002," *Sobranie zakonodatel'stva Rossijskoj Federacii* no. 5 (2002), 5235.
[42] Marat Salimov, Konstantin Smirnov, "Bezvozmezdnoi pomoshchi bolshe nie budiet," *Kommersant*, 18 August 1994, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/87130.
[43] Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, *Resolution No. 305* (Chisinau: 6 December 1994), https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=63410&lang=ru.

authorities ultimately did not recognize the invoices issued by Gazprom for natural gas supplied to Transnistria, Moscow used them to exert enormous political pressure on Chişinău.[44]

After Putin came to power, he began coercing debtor countries into abandoning barter schemes and paying for fossil fuel supplies in hard currency at ostensible world prices. His objective was to acquire shares of strategically significant enterprises in exchange for debts, thereby ensuring geopolitical allegiance through control of these entities. Understandably, as the commodity prices increased, the pace of debt accumulation grew proportionally, which, of course, considerably enhanced the Kremlin's negotiating positions.

Pipeline transportation systems for energy resource deliveries were particularly valuable to Putin. For example, in Belarus, the Kremlin aimed to acquire the Belarusian section of the main gas pipeline owned by the state company Beltransgaz.[45] Moscow wanted to take it as payment for the debt incurred from natural gas supplies. Gazprom sought to undervalue the market price of Beltransgaz in exchange for continuing gas supplies at a reduced rate. Despite the agreement reached between the governments, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko was reluctant to part with this strategically valuable asset, realizing that losing control over the pipeline system would limit his room for manoeuvre in relations with Russia.

Russian pressure, nevertheless, continued to intensify. In the summer of 2002, Vladimir Putin suggested Belarus should merge with Russia within two years, infuriating Lukashenko, who vehemently declared that Belarus would never become the “90th province of Russia.”[46] The Kremlin’s pressure reached its peak in the spring of 2004 when Gazprom decided to cut off gas supplies to Belarus. However, with the onset of the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, which both autocrats attributed to “Western intrigues,” Putin temporarily halted his geopolitical aggressiveness towards Belarus. The disagreements between Minsk and Moscow were reignited in early 2011 when Belarus, grappling with a profound economic crisis, sought financial assistance from Russia in the form of a USD 3 billion loan. As a prerequisite for extending the loan, the Russian government stipulated that Belarus must endorse a privatisation program, likely encompassing a stake in Beltransgaz.[47] In June 2011, a credit line for Belarus was sanctioned through the Anti-Crisis Fund of the Eurasian Economic Community, and an initial tranche of USD 800 million was disbursed.[48] In the autumn of the same year, Beltransgaz was conclusively taken over by Gazprom.

The most vivid manifestation of Russia's economic coercion occurred in 2013 in the months leading up to the EaP Vilnius Summit, where Armenia, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova were slated to sign association agreements. However, only the latter two, despite Russian pressure, managed to complete this process. Leading up to 2013, Armenia undertook significant measures in pursuit of an association agreement with the

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[44] James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad* (London: Royal Institute for International Affairs/Chatham House, 2013).

[45] “Soglashenie mezhdu Pravitel'stvom Rossijskoj Federacii i Pravitel'stvom Respubliki Belarus' o rasshirenii sotrudnichestva v gazovoj otrasli, 12 April 2002,” *Biulleten' mezhdunarodnyh dogovorov* no. 11 (2003), 59.

[46] MFA of the Republic of Belarus, “O soveshchanii u Prezidenta, posvjashchennom realizacii dogovorennostej, dostignutyh v hode ego vstrechi s V. Putinym,” 19 June 2002, https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/dc79e321464f19c2.html.

[47] The Government of the Russian Federation, “Predsedatel' Pravitel'stva Rossijskoj Federacii V.V.Putin provjol soveshhanie po osnovnym podhodam k formirovaniju federal'nogo bjudzheta na 2012 god i na planovyj period 2013–2014 godov,” 24 May 2011, http://archive.government.ru/docs/15328.

[48] Eurasian Development Bank, “Evrazijskij bank razvitiya perevel Respublike Belarus' 800 mln dollarov iz sredstv Antikrizisnogo fonda EvrAzES [The Eurasian Development Bank transferred $800 million to the Republic of Belarus from the funds of the EurAsEC Anti-Crisis Fund],” 21 June 2011, http://acf.eabr.org/rus/about/news/index.wbp?article-id=363AD294-233C-43F7-B032-C445FDC170F2.

EU, including the adoption of biometric passports and the elimination of the visa regime for participants in the Schengen Area. Over the next six months, the government intended to conclude negotiations on the economic aspects of the agreement. Nonetheless, concerns lingered among experts that Russia might contribute to changing the status quo in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to prevent Armenia from drifting towards the EU.[49]

In practice, the Kremlin adopted an approach of economic coercion. In 2012, Russia initiated efforts to substantially raise gas prices for Armenia, resulting in a hike from USD 180 to USD 270-320 per 1,000 cubic meters. Evidently, this manoeuvre aimed to compel Yerevan to renounce the Association Agreement with the EU, a decision President Serzh Sargsyan made in early September 2013 in Moscow after he had had talks with the Russian counterpart. In December of the same year, Vladimir Putin committed to reverting the gas price for Armenia to nearly its previous rates, reducing it from USD 270 to USD 189 per 1,000 cubic meters.[50]

After the 2013 Vilnius Summit and the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, divergent trends emerged in the development of trade relations between EN countries and Russia. On the one hand, Ukraine and Moldova, to avoid Kremlin's potential geopolitical coercion, began seeking opportunities to diversify the supply of natural resources and electricity (Figure 3). On the other hand, Armenia and Georgia (especially after the ascent of the Georgian Dream to power) intensified their trade and economic ties with Moscow. Remarkably, both countries are suspected of facilitating Russia's circumvention of economic sanctions imposed for violating the territorial integrity of Ukraine.[51]

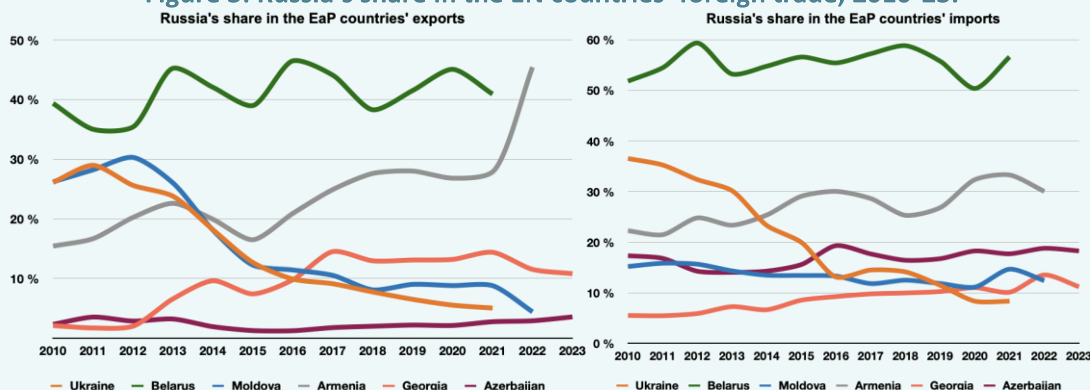
Overall, Russia's approach toward the EN countries is largely based on the old Soviet principle Moscow used with regard to its satellites: “loyalty in exchange for cheap energy resources.” Russia tries to legitimise this approach in the eyes of the EN countries' populations by promoting the idea that, both in the short and long run, the economic benefits of cooperation with Russia outweigh those of EU integration. Besides, the Kremlin strongly advocates the notion that EU integration demands expensive and difficult reforms, while alignment with Moscow guarantees long-term economic stability.

[49] Konrad Zasztowt, “Armenia between European and Eurasian Integration Models,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 37 (9 April 2013), https://pism.pl/upload/images/artykuly/legacy/files/13337.pdf.

[50] “Armenia poluchila ot Rossii skidku na gaz,” *Ukrainskaia Pravda*, 3 December 2013, https://www.epravda.com.ua/rus/news/2013/12/3/406464/ .

[51] Gabriel Gavin, “Russia’s trade partners clamp down on sanctions loopholes in face of EU pressure,” *Politico*, 19 June 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-ukraine-war-vladimir-putin-trade-partners-sanctions-loopholes-in-face-of-eu-pressure/; U.S. Department of Justice, “Department of Commerce, Department of the Treasury, and Department of Justice Tri-Seal Compliance Note: Cracking Down on Third-Party Intermediaries Used to Evade Russia-Related Sanctions and Export Controls,” 2 March 2023, https://www.justice.gov/nsd/file/1277536/dl?inline= .

Figure 3: Russia's share in the EN countries' foreign trade, 2010-23.



Sources: *Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia; State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan; National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus; National Statistics Office of Georgia; National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova; State Statistics Service of Ukraine.*

4 Military Threats

Since the early 1990s, Russia's foreign policy decisively embraced a strategy of maintaining a military presence in post-Soviet states. This trajectory was shaped by the interplay of several aspects.

Firstly, there was a substantial societal demand for the manifestation of attributes befitting a great power. The vast majority of Russians believed that Russia should preserve this status at any cost, even if it led to worsening relations with its neighbours.[52] A triumphant exhibition of military prowess, irrespective of its alignment with ethical and legal standards, consistently garnered substantial levels of public endorsement. To illustrate, the mobilisation of the Russian contingent to the Slatina airport near Pristina received approval from more than 80% of the Russian populace, while the deployment of Russian forces into Chechnya during the autumn of 1999 secured concurrence from approximately 70%.[53] Furthermore, 55% of Russians expressed readiness to endorse aerial strikes on the Pankisi Gorge, regardless of its status as Georgian territory.[54]

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that within Russia, various professional segments of the populace functioned as beneficiaries of an assertive foreign policy predicated on the instruments of hard security. This encompassed 2.8 million military personnel and several million employees of defence industry enterprises.[55]

Secondly, within the Kremlin, there was a discernible awareness of the diverse attitudes among the political elites of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries towards the withdrawal of Russian troops from the region. While the governments of Poland and the Baltic states, fortified by international support,

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[52] Moskovskie Novosti, 26 July 1992, p. 2.

[53] Veronika Bode, "Dinamika otnoshenija rossijan k Chechenskoj vojne," *Radio Svoboda*, 25 August 2001, https://www.svoboda.org/a/24219332.html.

[54] VTsIOM, "Bombit' li Gruziiu?," 5 October 2002, https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/bombit-li-gruziju.

[55] K. Sorokin, "Vozrozhdenie rossijskoj armii: blizhajshie perspektivy," *Mirovaja ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnoshenija*, no. 1 (1993): 5-16.

vehemently advocated the removal of all Russian soldiers from their territories, there was no consensus on this matter in Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, and Ukraine. Furthermore, in some of them, influential political forces aspired to strengthen positions in domestic politics with the Kremlin's assistance.

As early as January 1994, during a meeting with Russian envoys, Andrei Kozyrev, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, directed an instruction to prioritise the strategic importance of maintaining military presence in the region. He justified this approach by highlighting the peril of a "strategic vacuum" in the region that could be exploited by "unfriendly forces," implicitly referring to the United States.[56]

As a rule, Russian military presence in neighbouring countries was ensured through the existence of military bases, the deployment of international peacekeeping contingents, and the conduct of regular military exercises in bilateral or multilateral format within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Moreover, Russia made concerted efforts to maintain its monopoly on peacekeeping activities in the region and consistently rejected proposals to involve other countries in such missions.[57]

It is worth mentioning that attitudes towards the Russian military presence have always varied significantly among the EU's neighbourhood countries. Georgian and Moldovan authorities typically regarded the presence of Russian peacekeepers on their territory as an unavoidable evil and endeavoured to gradually eliminate their presence whenever possible. In Ukraine, the presence of the Russian fleet in Crimea was essentially imposed as a package condition for the conclusion of the 1997 Big Treaty, under which Russia committed to respecting Ukraine's territorial integrity. Following the Orange Revolution of 2004, President Viktor Yushchenko and Minister of Foreign Affairs Borys Tarasyuk raised the issue of not extending the agreements with Russia on the lease of military infrastructure in Crimea beyond 2017. However, this process was undermined by Viktor Yanukovych's signing of the Kharkiv Agreements in April 2010. Conversely, Armenia and Belarus, as members of the CSTO, have always viewed military cooperation with Russia as a strategic factor for their security. Specifically, Yerevan, mired in conflict with Azerbaijan, sought to retain control over the territories of Nagorno-Karabakh, captured during the First Karabakh War, with Moscow's support. In this context, it is noteworthy that more than 70% of Armenia's population viewed the annexation of Crimea positively and believed it was necessary to recognize the peninsula as part of Russia.[58]

In executing significant military campaigns and interventions in neighbouring countries, Russia appropriated the discourse of humanitarian intervention while concurrently expressing a distinctly unfavourable stance towards the humanitarian interventions undertaken by its geopolitical counterparts. Essentially, Moscow actively engaged in the near abroad with practices it consistently censured in Western actions. Specifically, the actions of Georgian forces in Tskhinvali on August 7, 2008, were framed by the Russian officials as "genocide" — a narrative subsequently employed to legitimise the recognition of the independence of South

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[56] *Kommersant-Daily,* 20 January 1994.
[57] MFA of the Russian Federation, "O vstreche ministra inostrannyh del Rossijskoj Federacii S.V. Lavrova s prezidentom Juzhnoj Osetii Ye. Kokojty," 2 February 2006, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1603827/; MFA of the Russian Federation, "Stenogramma vystuplenija i otvetov na voprosy deputatov Ministra inostrannyh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova v ramkah «pravitel'stvennogo chasa» v Gosudarstvennoj Dume Federal'nogo Sobranija Rossijskoj Federacii," 8 April 2008, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1691837.
[58] Ashot Gazarian, "Opros: Bol'shinstvo armyan podderzhivayut anneksiyu Kryma Rossiej," *Deutsche Welle*, 30 April 2014, https://p.dw.com/p/1BraY.

Ossetia and Abkhazia. A similar logic was employed to justify the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[59]

In fact, Russia regards its sphere of interest as a domain where it seeks, at its discretion, to reshape state borders and exert a decisive influence on the internal and external policies of the encompassed countries. In such instances, international legal norms are utilised not as foundational principles guiding foreign policy, but rather as a rhetorical cover for blatantly illegitimate actions. Outside the sphere of its influence, Russia upholds the concept of border inviolability and the sovereignty of states, adopting a critical perspective towards humanitarian interventions and the Responsibility to Protect (RtP) concept.

Amidst diminishing influence in informational, diplomatic, and economic realms, Russia inclines towards increasingly relying on military means in its foreign policy in the region. Should Ukraine fail to defend its independence and sovereignty in the war against Russia, it would undoubtedly heighten security risks for other EN countries, particularly for the Republic of Moldova.

5 Nuclear Sabre-Rattling

In its subtle form, nuclear brinkmanship has been an integral component of Moscow's foreign policy repertoire since the Soviet era. Apparently, Vladimir Putin quickly realized that it could be used to achieve more ambitious goals than merely saving face in the aftermath of the Cold War or obtaining loans to support a collapsing economy. On one occasion, he even implicitly acknowledged that, for him, nuclear sabre-rattling as a tool of political coercion and compulsion is absolutely acceptable.[60] This thesis is echoed in the publications of various Russian officials and propagandists. For instance, Alexey Pushkov believes that nuclear weapons (which he refers to as "weapons of the poor") make the possessing country invulnerable and enable it to effectively advance its interests even when confronted by technologically and economically superior adversaries.[61]

Allusions to the potential use of nuclear weapons have invariably heralded and accompanied the Kremlin's assertive imperial policies vis-à-vis neighbouring states. In his quest to thwart Georgia and Ukraine from acquiring NATO Membership Action Plans, Vladimir Putin, while speaking at the Bucharest NATO Summit, issued threats to undermine the territorial integrity of both Georgia and Ukraine and mentioned that Russia possessed a nuclear arsenal.[62] This played a pivotal role in prompting certain participants to strongly oppose extending invitations to Georgia and Ukraine to join the Alliance. The rationale behind such opposition, articulated by German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, was to avoid "provoking Russia."[63] In Moscow, these signals were unmistakably interpreted as a lack of readiness to confront Russia in the EN

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[59] Kirill Antonov, "Tatarstan postoial za Krym," *Kommersant*, 6 March 2014, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2424632; President of Russia, "Pryamaya liniya s Vladimirom Putinym," 17 April 2014, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796.

[60] President of the Russian Federation, "Stenogramma press-konferencii dlja rossijskih i inostrannyh zhurnalistov," 31 January 2006, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23412.

[61] Alexey Pushkov, *Vneshnjaja politika Rossii i ee nacional'nye interesy v XXI veke* (Moscow: MGIMO, 2011), 41-45.

[62] "V NATO nakoniets uslyshali Rossiju," *RIA Novosti*, 4 April 2008, https://ria.ru/20080404/103772337.html.

[63] Bucharest NATO Summit, "Russia must not be provoked by NATO enlargement, said the German Minister of Foreign Affairs," 02 April 2008, http://www.summitbucharest.gov.ro/en/doc_160.html.

region. Putin clearly grasped that any foray into Ukraine or Georgia on his part would elicit little more than a proverbial shrug from the West.

Immediately after the Bucharest Summit, the Russian leadership embarked on an intensive testing of the Western reaction, engaging in provocative actions against Georgia. Moscow, without any prior negotiations with Tbilisi and in violation of Georgia's sovereignty, established direct relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia[64] and arbitrarily increased the size of its military contingent on those territories,[65] while Russian air forces repeatedly violated Georgian airspace. The predominant response from Western leaders reflected a palpable sense of helplessness, as they recurrently voiced conventional expressions of concern over the escalating tensions between Russia and Georgia. Their calls for direct negotiations among the conflicting parties seemed to reverberate as mere ritualistic incantations.

Vladimir Putin's successor, Dmitry Medvedev continued to operate in a similar vein. In mid-July 2008, a month before the start of the Russo-Georgian war, during a closed-door meeting, he urged Russian diplomats to be more assertive in their public activities abroad and to employ "international law and the nuclear shield" as the primary arguments in disputes.[66] Throughout the fall of 2008, the affirmation of Russia as a nuclear power persisted as a dominating Kremlin narrative. It is noteworthy that the West then failed to provide an unequivocal answer to the question of responsibility for the onset of the Russo-Georgian war. While the United States tended to attribute it to South Ossetian separatists[67] and emphasised Russia's violation of Georgia's sovereignty,[68] the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission established by the EU and headed by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini studiously avoided reaching a firm conclusion.[69] No Western sanctions were imposed on Russia for the blatant violations of Georgia's territorial integrity, and many European states simply reverted to the business-as-usual formula in their relations with the Kremlin.[70]

Essentially, the Kremlin's calculations proved accurate — amidst the military invasion, Georgia found itself alone against an adversary with superior military power. In less than a year, the Barack Obama administration even put forward a "reset" in relations with Russia. For the Kremlin, this was a clear signal that Washington would rather leave the emerging post-Soviet democracies one-on-one with Russia than sacrifice "constructive engagement" with Moscow on global issues.

After the annexation of Crimea, Moscow continued to play the nuclear card. In the midst of the hostilities near Ilovais'k in August 2014, while the Western community contemplated intensifying sanctions against Moscow, Vladimir Putin once again laid the main trump card on the table — i.e. Russia's nuclear weapons. At that moment, the Russian president reminded the West that it was better not to mess with Russia, as it

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[64] MFA of the Russian Federation, "O poruchenijah Prezidenta Rossii Pravitel'stvu Rossijskoj Federacii v otnoshenii Abhazii i Juzhnoj Osetii," 16 April 2008, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/342137.

[65] "Rossija vvela v Abhaziju dopolnitel'nyj kontingent mirotvorcev," *Deutsche Welle,* 1 May 2008, https://www.dw.com/ru/россия-ввела-в-абхазию-дополнительный-контингент-миротворцев/a-3304601.

[66] Mikhail Zygar', Vladimir Solov'ev, "Poslanie poslam," *Kommersant*, 21 July 2008, https://kommersant.ru/doc/913733.

[67] Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), 686-687.

[68] U.S. State Department., *State Department Documents and Publications*, Press Releases: Upcoming NATO Ministerial Meeting, 26 November 2008.

[69] Timothy Heritage, "Georgia started war with Russia: EU-backed report," *Reuters,* 30 September 2009, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-russia-report-idUSTRE58T4MO20090930.

[70] Hannes Adomeit, "German-Russian Relations: Change of Paradigm versus 'Business as Usual," *IFRI, Note du Cerfa*, no. 120 (February 2015), https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ndc_120_adomeit_en_0.pdf.

"is one of the most powerful nuclear states."[71] Subsequently, he repeatedly articulated similar assertions, engaging in rhetoric that speculated on the dynamics of rivalry with the United States and the potential emergence of a nuclear conflict.

The Western response to the annexation of Crimea and the military activities in the Donbas region materialised through sanctions targeting Russian officials and military commanders, as well as state-owned entities involved in finance, arms manufacturing, shipbuilding, and construction. However, a discernible disparity emerged in the sanction strategies between Washington and Brussels. In comparison to European sanctions, those imposed by the United States affected a much larger number of prominent Russian state and private enterprises, as well as a broader range of individuals within Putin's inner circle. Despite being considered *persona non grata* in the United States, many of them, including Vladimir Yakunin, continued to openly enter EU territory and engage in subversive activities.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the sanctions has consistently been questioned due to their measured nature. Harsher measures, such as an embargo on Russian hydrocarbon exports, disconnection from the SWIFT international payment system, or imposing a comprehensive ban on interactions with Russian banks, were not undertaken. Consequently, the West implicitly acknowledged a strategic impasse concerning Russia, habitually adhering to a logic of passive containment. This approach was aimed at containing the deterioration of relations with Moscow, even in the face of plainly audacious behaviour and demonstrative disregard for the voluntarily undertaken international legal obligations. The West could not find a viable solution to effectively counter a country that simultaneously held a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, possessed nuclear weapons, and systematically violated international law.

Nuclear brinkmanship accompanied Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Interestingly, as the Ukrainian Armed Forces gained ground, Russian propaganda turned up the heat on its nuclear sabre-rattling. This series of events underscores a crucial geopolitical tactic for the Kremlin: wielding the nuclear card and subtly highlighting the potential for a direct showdown with the West. The more complex and precarious the situation appears for Moscow, the more willingly it deploys veiled allusions to the specter of a significant nuclear clash. This is one of the phobias actively exploited by the Kremlin in its public rhetoric to paralyse the process of aiding Ukraine.

By accentuating the looming threat of a nuclear apocalypse, the Russian leadership seeks to sow doubt, instil fear among Western nations, undermine their unity, and chip away at their collective solidarity. This is underscored by Putin's recent press conference, during which he mentioned the nuclear bomb and explicitly stated that the West only starts negotiating when faced with threats.[72] It is noteworthy that *Russlandversteher* as well as their critics, are divided about the extent to which Putin is mad or pragmatic and rational. Even many of the former understand that Putin's nuclear rhetoric is nothing but a calculated bluff aimed at exploiting Western contradictions and hesitancy in its foreign policy.

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[71] President of Russia, "Stenograficheskij otchyot o vstreche s uchastnikami foruma Seliger-2014," 29 August 2014, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46507.

[72] President of Russia, "Itogi goda s Vladimirom Putinym," 14 December 2023, http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72994.

6 Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Currently, the central aim of Russia's strategy concerning the EU's eastern neighbourhood is the erosion of their sovereignty and the attainment of de facto control over decision-making in their external and internal affairs. To accomplish this objective, the Kremlin relies on instruments of negative motivation, such as fostering separatism, exploiting hard security vulnerabilities, employing economic coercion, and engaging in nuclear sabre-rattling. Russia conspicuously foreswears an idealistic component in its foreign policy, refraining from pursuing a specific form of political regime, whether it be authoritarianism or democracy. Rather, its primary efforts in the EN space are focused on discrediting "unfriendly" governments in the eyes of their populations; supporting its tactical political partners mostly representing radical left and right parties; heightening societal tensions through the dissemination of fake news; and consolidating anti-European (and broadly, anti-Western) political forces under the guise of advocating for traditional values.

Apparently, the Kremlin believes that gaining foreign policy advantages is always easier by discrediting the idea of European integration and exploiting vulnerabilities in the political and social institutions of neighbouring states. In this context, Russian foreign policy stands in stark contrast to that of many European Union member states and the United States, where the promotion of human rights and democracy plays a pivotal role.

In pursuit of its foreign policy objectives, Russia employs an extensive array of instruments, weaponising virtually all forms of interaction with neighbouring countries: the Russian language and culture, "common history," "compatriots," monuments and mass media, and economic ties. A thorough examination of the aforementioned factors suggests that the Kremlin's overarching strategy and tactical manoeuvres are unlikely to undergo substantial alterations, particularly in the medium term. They are deeply rooted in the peculiarities of the institutional design of Russian society, politics, and economy.

Throughout the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia is experiencing an intensified ideological indoctrination of its youth within educational institutions. Besides, the number of state-nationalised enterprises is growing, and Putin's vertical of power is consolidating internally by incorporating proponents of the neo-imperial paradigm, particularly those who participated in the conflict against Ukraine. All these trends will further strengthen the expansionist momentum in Russia's foreign policy.

Drawing from the analysis, we posit the following recommendations for effectively enhancing democratic resilience of the EN countries and mitigating Russia's influence in the region:

- **Europe as a Security Provider:** It is imperative to formulate long-term investment strategies encompassing both the EU military-industrial sector and the hard security infrastructure in the EN countries aspiring for closer ties with the EU. Simultaneously, expediting the integration of these countries into the EU and NATO and increasing investments in diversifying energy and electricity supply networks are pivotal.

- **New Strategic Messaging:** With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, there has been a profound shift in the perception of Russia in the foreign policy of many EU countries. Previously referred to as a challenging partner, Russia is now more realistically assessed as a long-term threat to European

security.[73] This trend should be reflected in the updated joint EU strategy towards both Russia and the EaP countries, which should avoid self-imposed red lines and display no fear of Russia. In practical terms, it is important not to burden the weapons supplies to Ukraine with artificial restrictions regarding its territorial use. Moreover, Western governments should display less sensitivity to the Kremlin's nuclear blackmail. The Western hesitancy and uncertainty regarding Russia serve to further whet Putin's appetite for escalating the stakes.

- **No Grey Zones in Europe:** This principle should serve as a fundamental tenet of the EU's foreign policy towards the EN space. Deviation from this rule in hopes of reaching compromise agreements with the Kremlin, at the expense of the sovereignty of neighbouring countries, may ultimately result in a strategic defeat for Europe. It is imperative to ensure that the EN countries, which are pursuing European integration and making progress in reforming their political and social institutions, are not left to contend with threats from revisionist Russia on their own.

- **Zero Tolerance towards Russian Propaganda:** Vigilance is imperative if there is a wish to thwart the influence of Russian propaganda within the EU's information landscape, and we should foster similar practices in the EN countries. Collaborative endeavours are essential to counter the dissemination of Russian narratives in the media of EU member states and candidate countries, which must be supported in implementing the most advanced programs for developing critical thinking and digital literacy at all levels of the educational system. Furthermore, it is necessary to improve the procedure for suspending the activities of Russian media outlets engaged in hate speech and disinformation throughout the EU. It should not be the case that the Kremlin’s propaganda TV channels are banned in some countries while enjoying unrestricted access to audiences in others.

[73] Robin Allers, Håkon Lunde Saxi, “Zeitenwende or business as usual? German defence policy following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,” in Jaane Haaland Matlary and Rob Johnson (eds.), *NATO and the Russian War in Ukraine: Strategic Integration and Military Interoperability* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2024), 152-174.

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Towards a sustained demos in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood

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