



REDEMOS

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

Policy Brief 2

Strategic Clarity & Resolve: Confronting Russia in the European Neighbourhood

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Setting the Scene

The Russian political establishment has always perceived the collapse of the Soviet Union not as an opportunity to embark on a process towards full-blown democratisation, but as the embodiment of the USSR's defeat and, consequently, the West's victory in the Cold War. In general, small and medium-sized neighbouring states are seen by the Kremlin as inherently dependent objects of influence of major powers, while the EU's eastern neighbourhood, in particular, is regarded as an exclusive space of Russia's "special responsibility" and as such as an integral component of its self-perceived great power status.

Essentially, Russia has embraced the old Soviet concept of "limited sovereignty", openly denying the EU's eastern neighbourhood countries the right to independently determine their foreign policy course. This approach has manifested itself in Russia's military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine, as well as in its hybrid subversive activities targeting every EU eastern neighbourhood country. Moreover, the Kremlin's ultimatum of 17 December 2021, demanding from the West to provide Russia legal security guarantees, indicates that its geopolitical ambitions extend far beyond the EU eastern neighbourhood. Under these circumstances, EU member states must adapt their foreign policy to bolster their own security, as well as to help EU eastern neighbourhood countries resist Russia's attempts to undermine their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Key Findings

- Russia's primary objective in its approach to the EU's eastern neighbourhood is to undermine these countries' sovereignty and establish effective control over both their domestic and foreign policy decisions.
- 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.
- Moscow favours more those EU eastern neighbourhood countries that tend to 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.
- The Kremlin seeks to gain foreign policy advantages in the EU's eastern neighbourhood by exploiting weaknesses in their political and social institutions as well as by discrediting the very idea of European integration.
- Russia's foreign policy toward the EU eastern neighbourhood countries is marked by strong inertia and unlikely to change significantly at least in the medium term, as its external action is deeply embedded in the particular institutional makeup of Russia's political system, societal structure, and economic model.

Policy Recommendations

- **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 EU eastern neighbourhood countries that are 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. This trend should be reflected in the updated joint EU strategy towards both Russia and the Eastern Partnership 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 their 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 its eastern neighbourhood. Deviation from this rule in the hope 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 those EU eastern neighbourhood 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 the objective is to thwart the influence of Russian propaganda within the EU's information landscape, and similar practices in the EU's eastern neighbourhood countries should be fostered. Collaborative endeavours are essential to counter the dissemination of Russian narratives in the media of EU member and candidate countries, which must be supported in implementing the most advanced programs for developing critical thinking and digital literacy at all levels of their education systems. Furthermore, it is necessary to improve the respective procedures 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.

The full study – **REDEMOS D7.2 Narratives of external norm contenders across the EU's eastern neighbourhood** – can be found at <https://redemos.eu/resources/publications/working-papers/>



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Towards a sustained demos in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood**

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