

# Russia's Recent Foreign Policy toward its Neighbours in EU Eastern Neighbourhood

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## Abstract

The analysis addresses **Russia's foreign policy** and **Russia's reaction** to external and internal crises **in its neighbourhood**, what it shares with the EU.

The analysis examines the thesis presented by mainly Russian scholars, that during the last years Russia has adopted more cautious approach to interference of internal affairs of its neighbours that coincides with a re-evaluation of its geopolitical priorities and a more calculated approach based on an awareness of its limitations.

The analysis finds that although there are some signs that some adaptation to less assertive stance to some crises has taken place, these developments have not changed the fundamental goals of Russian foreign policy. Russia has shown continuing readiness to interfere, both with economic and military instruments into internal affairs of neighbouring states.

However, analysis finds that there could be seen emerging **tactical differing policy attitude from Russia towards neighbours**.

1. Firstly, Russian policy toward those **countries** who have chosen **pro-Western democratic** and pro-EU/pro-Western direction of development and are supported by EU and USA (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova).

In the first case **Russia continues to interfere aggressively in their internal affairs** by maintaining "frozen" and "hot" conflicts in their territories and to pursue active hybrid attacks to destabilise pro-western and pro-democratic governments.

2. Secondly, toward those **neighbours, which do not have realistic geopolitical alternative to Russian support** and therefore continue to follow pro-Russian foreign policy or have more autocratic form of government (Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia).

In their case **Russia has adopted more restrained attitude** and has not got directly involved in some internal or interstate conflicts in those countries.

The analysis also presents overview of the theoretical views of Russian and international scholars related to the **question of modern Russian statehood and how it influences Russian foreign policy toward its neighbours**. The analysis of Russian foreign policy documents and official statements is also presented. Also, the Russian policy toward EU Eastern Partnership policy as well as Russian foreign policy toward Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova in 2020–2021 is studied.

The analysis concludes that the **EU and USA continuing efforts are necessary to support countries in the EU Eastern Neighbourhood**, especially those with pro-Western orientation, by maintaining and if necessary, strengthening sanctions against Russia and helping those countries to fight hybrid threats as long as Russia's behaviour does not change.

## Introduction

2020 was tumultuous year for countries in Russia's and EU's neighbourhood. In August 2020, a fraud-marred presidential election brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets of Minsk, ushering in several months of unrest and forcing Belarus's President Lukashenka to solicit Moscow's grudging support. In September 2020, the simmering conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh erupted into all-out war, involving Turkey into a confrontation in which Russia has long been the leading arbiter. In November 2020, Moldova's presidential election pitted the pro-Russian incumbent against a rival pushing for closer ties with Europe and brought victory for the latter, dealing another blow to Moscow's interests. The political processes that started in 2020 in Armenia and Moldova led to the declaration of snap elections in Armenia and in Moldova on 2021. And in the end of 2020 and in the beginning of 2021 the Normandy Format negotiations continued without any clear results to solving the long-lasting conflict in Eastern Ukraine and in March-April concentration of Russian military forces to Ukraine border started to threaten to lead to a new escalation of conflict.

Therefore, it is the right time to examine, how has Russia reacted to those recent events and if there are really any signs of "postimperial transformation" of Russian foreign policy in air that is been predicted by some analysts. Some Russian experts have suggested that a new, more cautious approach in intervening in neighbours' affairs than in the years past, coincides with a re-evaluation of its geopolitical priorities and the instruments available to achieve them. They claim that such calculation has led to pursuit of a more pragmatic Russian foreign policy toward a region between EU and Russia that a Moscow has long claimed to be its sphere of influence. The outwardly less assertive stance could be seen as a sign of a more calculated approach based on an awareness of limitations, rather than a

geopolitical retreat.<sup>1</sup>

The other and more common point of view among analysts is, that there are no significant changes in Russian foreign policy and Russian foreign policy priorities and their realisation have not changed significantly due to more limited resources and are still focused controlling its immediate neighbours and is attempting to establish more permanent zone of influence. The following analysis examines both viewpoints and presents conclusions regarding their validity.

### **Theoretical approaches: Russia - Nation State, Imperial legacy and Great Powerness**

To analyse complex of ideas related to modern Russian statehood and legacy of Soviet Empire and its modern incarnation we should look at opinions of Russian and international experts dealing with those issues.

In a 2017 RAND study Andrew Radin and Clint Reach have proposed five core interests that guide contemporary Russian foreign policy:

1. defense of the country and the regime
2. influence in the near abroad
3. a vision of Russia as a great power
4. non-interference in domestic affairs
5. political and economic cooperation as a partner equal to other great powers.

According to RAND study, Russia's belief that it is a great power and its concern about maintaining a buffer from foreign invasion may be reason why it seeks domination in its neighbourhood, but this desire for regional influence most likely runs even deeper than strategic concerns alone would suggest. Russian and Western analysts cite a longstanding "imperial" identity. RAND study also points out that from Russia's point of view, its prerogative of a great power permits it an exception from the principle of non-interference and the exclusive ability to interfere in the affairs of its neighbours.<sup>2</sup>

Russian expert Alexei Miller acknowledges that the legacy of Soviet empire is a very complex challenge. However, all attempts to take revenge, that is, to restore the Soviet empire, are invariably doomed to failure.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Matthew Luxmoore. A "Postimperial Transformation": With Its Neighborhood In Turmoil, Russia Reassesses The Costs Of Hegemony. – RFE/RL. 29.12.2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-reassesses-costs-hegemony-2020-putin/31024630.html>

2 Andrew Radin and Clint Reach. Russian views of International Order. – RAND 2017. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1826.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1826.html)

3 Alexei I. Miller. Nation, Empire-State and Nation-State: Beyond Usual Misinterpretations Contemporary Russia and

According to Miller as one legacy of imperial past, Russian elites have historically given priority to foreign policy over domestic policy. Russia's place in the league of great powers is determined by the Soviet empire's legacy, that is, by the seat in the UN Security Council inherited from the Soviet Union and its military, mainly nuclear, capabilities. Miller argues that it would be difficult to retain this status in the long term without qualitative changes in the dynamics of internal development. This will become clearer if one assesses the dynamics of development in the post-Soviet period, which by now as resulted not only in the loss of Russia's influence in most of the countries that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but also in the disintegration of the Slavic core of the Russia, Belarus and.<sup>4</sup>

Miller points out, that the changed role and place of the country in the world, particularly in the area Russia considers to be its "near abroad", have led to adopt the aggressive official attitude towards the situation of Russians who found themselves outside of Russia after the collapse of the USSR. This position reflected the hope for a reversal of the general trend towards the disintegration of imperial space in favour of **post-imperial reintegration**. Today it could be said with confidence that the integration efforts (like CIS and EAEU) have largely failed, and will not be able, to change the general trend. One of the possible answers to this situation is **irredentism** (a territorial claim based on a national, ethnic, or historical basis). According to Miller, given the reincorporation of Crimea and the situation in a number of unrecognized republics, it could be argued that Russia has so far shown "inconsistency in irredentist politics, which is directly related to the contradictory approach to the legacy of empire."<sup>5</sup>

Another Russian expert Andrei Tsygankov argues that many members of Russian elite are in favour of concept of **Russia's great powerness** (*великая держава*) as modern incarnation of Russian imperial thinking. Great powerness thinking has traditionally been supported not only elites but also by broad sections of society, especially if it did not require significant sacrifices from people and did not result in foreign policy defeats. At the same time, foreign military interventions and economic aid often proved to be a heavy burden for the Russian people if the state solved foreign policy tasks by putting too much strain on public resources. Its core postulate is a strong state capable of governing a complex country. Russian great powerness implies (1) a sphere of cultural and value influence in Eurasia and Europe, (2) political and economic self-sufficiency, and (3) military capabilities sufficient to defeat any other power. According to Tsygankov, the great powerness understood this way ensures

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the Legacy of Empires. – Russia in Global Affairs. Nr 2, 2020, April/June.  
<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/nation-empire-state-nation-state/>

4 Alexei I. Miller. Nation, Empire-State and Nation-State: Beyond Usual Misinterpretations Contemporary Russia and the Legacy of Empires. – Russia in Global Affairs. Nr 2, 2020, April/June.  
<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/nation-empire-state-nation-state/>

5 Alexei I. Miller. Nation, Empire-State and Nation-State: Beyond Usual Misinterpretations Contemporary Russia and the Legacy of Empires. – Russia in Global Affairs. Nr 2, 2020, April/June.  
<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/nation-empire-state-nation-state/>

the achievement of the strategic goals of drawing close to Europe, keeping special trust-based relations with the East, and maintaining decisive influence in Eurasia.<sup>6</sup>

According to Tsygankov, great powerness in foreign policy, advocated first by Prime Minister Primakov and continued by Putin, enabled Russia to regain important positions lost in the 1990s and the decision to focus on the strengthening of the balance of power and the prestige of a great power has passed the test of time. But to continue with great powerness and a transition to new statehood is more difficult as it requires a number of measures to overcome the political legacy of the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

Sergei Karaganov is considered to be author of so-called “Karaganov Doctrine”, which states that Moscow should pose as the defender of human rights of ethnic Russians living in the “near abroad” for the purpose of gaining political influence in these regions. Karaganov’s ideas preceded long term Russian foreign policy doctrine in relations with its neighbours.<sup>8</sup> According to critics of Russian foreign policy, the continuing implementation of Karaganov’s ideas can be observed on the Russia’s near abroad policy stretching from Georgia, Moldova to Ukraine and other neighbouring states including: territorial claims, threatening the territorial integrity of neighbours, appealing to the Russian speaking population, support of local separatists, bribing local political, military and business elite.<sup>9</sup>

However, even Karaganov has recently somewhat revised his views regarding desirability of great power influence Russia should exercise over at least some of its neighbours. In a recent article Karaganov stresses that Russia must be a strong “fortress” great power. However, the Russian policy toward the neighbouring countries is still driven by nostalgia for the lost territories.

According to Karaganov, Russia became great not because it had conquered the right-bank Ukraine, and Central Asia or Transcaucasia. It became a great power because it acquired Siberia. And it was due to **Siberian resources** that Russia became a great European power, and then a great world power. Moreover, Siberia is now the fastest growing region in the world. Therefore, it is necessary for Russia to continue the turn to the east, maintaining a certain level of stability in parts of the former republics of the Soviet Union, and writing off what apparently needs to be written off.<sup>10</sup>

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6 Andrei P. Tsygankov. G – Great Powerness. – Russia in Global Affairs. Nr 1, 2020, January/March. <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/g-great-powerness/>

7 Andrei P. Tsygankov. G – Great Powerness. – Russia in Global Affairs. Nr 1, 2020, January/March. <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/g-great-powerness/>

8 С. А. Караганов. Проблемы защиты интересов Российско ориентированного населения в “ближнем” зарубежье. – Дипломатический Вестник, 15.-30.11.1992, с. 43–45.

9 Konstantin L. Russian “Near Abroad” Policy under Karaganov’s Doctrine and Crimea. – Association of Reintegration of Crimea. 01.12.2020. <https://arc.construction/6829>

10 Сергей Караганов. “В этом мире Россия должна быть крепостью.” – Россия в глобальной политике. 02.03.2021.

According to Taras Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri, many Western scholars have stressed that Putin's rejection of Western influence in Russia's 'privileged zone of interests' and alienation from the West was 'years in the making'. The traditional theory of Eurasianism, in which Russia is viewed not as a colonising empire but as a positive civilisation that extends beyond Russia's borders, was rejuvenated and popularised. In this view, Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians are parts of a single Russian World (*Russkii Mir*) civilisation, the division of which into separate states is artificial. It is this Russian World civilisation which Russian nationalists fear is under threat from the West. Putin embraced nationalism and conservative ideology after the colour revolutions, and went further after widespread street protests to his return to the presidency in 2012.<sup>11</sup>

Taras Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri also point out that the present Russian understanding of identity is coupled with three factors pertaining to Ukraine and Belarus: (1) Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians are 'one people'; (2) Belarus and Ukraine are artificial states; (3) the borders of Belarus and especially Ukraine are artificial, referring not only to the Crimea but also to Eastern and Southern Ukraine (so-called Novorossiia). These views are diametrically opposed to how Ukrainians view their own identity in ethnic, civic or ethnic-civic terms. Ironically, Putin's military aggression has strengthened Ukrainian identity and made Russian understanding of Ukraine and Ukrainians even more obsolete. In Moscow's eyes, Ukraine is central to rebuilding a sphere of influence within the former Soviet space and to re-establishing Russia as a great power.<sup>12</sup>

## Russian Foreign Policy Concept and Official Statements

Russian Foreign Policy concept currently in force is from year 2016. It has separate section dealing with regional foreign policy priorities.<sup>13</sup>

The concept states that the foreign policy priorities of the Russian Federation include developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation with member States of the **Commonwealth**

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<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/krepost-rossiya/>

11 Taras Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri. The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics: Ukraine and the Challenge to the European Order. – E-International Relations 2018

<https://www.e-ir.info/publication/the-sources-of-russias-great-power-politics-ukraine-and-the-challenge-to-the-european-order/>

12 Taras Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri. The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics: Ukraine and the Challenge to the European Order. E-International Relations Publishing, 2018. <https://www.e-ir.info/publication/the-sources-of-russias-great-power-politics-ukraine-and-the-challenge-to-the-european-order/>

13 Foreign Policy Concept of The Russian Federation. Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016. [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248)

**of Independent States** (CIS). Russia is also committed to expanding strategic cooperation with the Republic of Belarus within the **Union State**. Russia views the **Collective Security Treaty Organization** (CSTO) as one of the key elements of the current security framework in the post-Soviet space.

Russia views as a key objective strengthening and expanding integration within the **Eurasian Economic Union** (EAEU) with the Republic of Armenia, Republic of Belarus, Republic of

### **Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic**

Regarding **Ukraine**, it is stated that Russian Federation is interested in developing political, economic, cultural and spiritual ties with Ukraine in all areas on the basis of mutual respect and commitment to building partnership relations with due regard for Russia's national interests. Russia undertakes to make every effort to promote political and diplomatic settlement of the what Russia characterizes as an "internal conflict in Ukraine" in cooperation with all the interested States and international agencies. That is how the concept characterizes relations with a country under Russia's attack since 2014.

Regarding **Georgia**, it is stated, that Russia is interested in normalizing relations with Georgia in areas where the Georgian side is willing to do the same, with due consideration for the current political environment in the South Caucasus. At the same time, nulling the previous statement, the Russia declares its goal to be assisting the establishment of non-recognised entities of **Abkhazia** and of **South Ossetia** as "independent states".

Also, in concept it is stated that Russia facilitates the resolution of **regional conflicts** by political and diplomatic means through collective action by the international community, believing that such conflicts can only be resolved through inclusive dialogue and negotiations involving all sides rather than by isolating any of them. In reality it means Russian military involvement in those crises and Russian insistence to recognise internationally entities set up through Russian military interventions.

According to the concept, Russia strongly advocates a political and diplomatic settlement of conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Specifically, Russia works within the existing multilateral negotiating mechanism to find an inclusive solution to the **Transnistrian issue**. Also Russia pretends to be working to settle the **Nagorno-Karabakh conflict** by working together with the other States that are co-chairs in the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

According to the concept, especial interest should be shown to ensuring the protection of rights and legitimate interests of **Russian nationals abroad** and protecting rights and **legitimate interests of compatriots** living abroad and **promoting the Russian language and culture**. Russia's goal is to facilitate the preservation of the Russian diaspora's identity and its ties with the historical homeland, as well as voluntary relocation of compatriots to the Russia.

Foreign Policy Concept also includes among its main objectives, **'to pursue neighbourly relations** with adjacent States, assist them in eliminating the existing and preventing the emergence of the new hotbeds of tension and conflicts on their territory'.

However, other official Russian documents take much more hostile line toward West and the neighbouring countries.

It is stressed in **Russian Military Doctrine** that Russia sees danger in NATO and in the basing of foreign military contingents in the countries bordering Russia and Russia's allies. It is also stressed that Russia is ready to use military force to defend its citizens and compatriots abroad.<sup>14</sup>

In **Russian National Security Strategy** it is stressed that Western support to "colour revolutions" is considered to be a threat to Russia and that the aim of West is to oppose integration processes and to create hotbeds of tension in the Eurasian region, which has a negative impact on the implementation of Russian national interests. The support of the United States and the European Union for the so called "*anti-constitutional coup d'état*" in Ukraine has led to a deep split in Ukrainian society and the outbreak of an armed conflict.<sup>15</sup>

Also, the **official statements** of Russian leaders do not often follow the lofty principles of Foreign Policy concept. Russian President Vladimir Putin in his 2014 speech on the occasion of illegal annexation of Crimea stated that this part of Ukraine belongs to Russia based on historical right of conquest, majority of ethnic Russians in its population and due to referendum result in occupied Crimea. Putin also stressed that Russia and Ukraine are one people. In his speech Putin said that in Russian people's hearts and minds, Crimea had always been an inseparable part of Russia, although earlier Russia under Putin himself had de facto and de jure recognized by treaties that Crimea was Ukrainian territory. According to Putin the internal issues of Ukrainian politics (Euromaidan or "coup" in Putin's parlance) gave Russia the right to change status quo. Putin also declared that Ukrainians should not believe those who want you to fear Russia, shouting that other regions will follow Crimea. He also stressed that millions of Russians and Russian-speaking people continue live in Ukraine and Russia will always defend their interests using political, diplomatic and legal means.<sup>16</sup> This way Putin in fact declared that *Russia now considers use of military force to achieve Russia's irredentist goals a new normal for Russian foreign policy.*

In 2020 Valdai Club speech Putin continued the line that in former USSR people lived in a single country, and not just for many years but for centuries, and have strong ties and very deep cooperation in the economy, humanitarian ties. They all speak a common language.

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14 Военная доктрина Российской Федерации. 30 декабря 2014. <https://rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>

15 Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации. 31 декабря 2015. <https://rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>

16 Address by President of the Russian Federation. 18.03.2014. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

In a sense, to a greater or lesser degree, they are essentially people of the same cultural space, not to mention Russian history. According to Putin, regardless of the current events and today's political environment, this community of interests will eventually pave the way to the restoration of Russian ties with all these countries, no matter how difficult Russia's present ties with them are.<sup>17</sup>

In his Address to Federal Assembly 21.04.2021, Putin stated that Moscow strived to have good relations with other countries. At the same time he threatened: "But if someone mistakes Russian good intentions for indifference or weakness and intends to burn or even blow up these bridges, they must know that Russia's response will be asymmetrical, swift and tough. No foreign state should cross Russia's "red lines" which Russia itself will determine where that is and threatened that anyone who stages any provocations that threaten Russian safety will regret it in a way, they've never regretted anything before". Putin drew an explicit parallel between Belarus today and the events in Ukraine in 2014 that led to the ouster of the pro-Russian president in Ukraine, Moscow's annexation of Crimea, and Russia's fomenting of a separatist war in eastern Ukraine.<sup>18</sup>

Regarding the dialogue with EU about common neighbourhood, the Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has as recently as in February 2021 officially stated willingness to discuss the EU's plans on the post-Soviet space (the South Caucasus and Central Asia) on condition that the European Union will consider Russia's "lawful interests" near its borders and in its relations with its next door neighbours and allies.

At the same time Lavrov tried to blame Ukraine over EU's commitment to Russia's fulfilment of the Minsk Agreements. He has stated that EU has become hostage of Ukraine's unwillingness to follow them.<sup>19</sup> According to Lavrov Russia is interested in keeping the Minsk agreements on the table, because they were approved by the UN Security Council and contain arrangements that are very difficult to abandon. But Paris and Berlin support solving Ukrainian issues in the Normandy format which means without Donbas, which is not acceptable to Russia.<sup>20</sup> On 1 April 2021 Lavrov even threatened that any attempts to "start" a new military conflict in Ukraine's war-torn east could end up destroying Ukraine.<sup>21</sup>

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17 Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club. 22.10.2020. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261>

18 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly. 21.04.2021. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65418>

19 Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission Josep Borrell, Moscow, February 5, 2021. [https://www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/asset\\_publisher/7OvQR5KJWmR/content/id/4553286](https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWmR/content/id/4553286)

20 Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with the Solovyov Live YouTube channel, February 12, 2021 [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4570813](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4570813)

21 Russia says any attempt to start a new war in Donbas could destroy Ukraine - TASS. – Reuters. 01.04.2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-lavrov-idUSKBN2BO5F2>

In reality, Russian politics has been and still is not friendly and cooperative toward neighbours and can be also shown not to be consistent with Russia's real foreign policy. As of 2021 Russia continues to occupy either directly or with help of proxy forces Ukrainian Crimea and parts of Eastern Donbas region, Georgian South Ossetia and Abkhazia and Moldovan Transnistria. Russia has so far rejected international community's calls to restore those areas countries whose legitimate territories they are and the international negotiations to achieve such goal have been fruitless due to Russia's unwillingness to achieve negotiated and international law based end to those conflicts.

### Russian foreign policy and EU Eastern Partnership Policy

The EU's involvement since 2008 in Eastern Partnership Area was encouraged and welcomed by the most local elites but resented by Russia, and those local oligarchs dependent of Russian capital and access to Russian markets. As Russia saw it – the gradual opening up of the region undermined Russia's power and position what Moscow has long regarded as its privileged sphere of influence. In response, Russia's policy in the neighbourhood was at first to impede this trend and later to reverse it. Russia was reclaiming its sphere of influence, relying on a judicious dose of sharp sticks and sweet carrots.<sup>22</sup>

Also the Russian experts acknowledge that throughout the history of the Eastern Partnership, critical assessments of this initiative of the European Union prevailed in the Russian expert communities, especially in 2013–2014. They either did not take it seriously or thought that the EU would step by step and thoroughly pursue a line on the implementation of the program adopted by it to involve the CIS countries into its orbit to the detriment of Russian interests. However, although Russian experts have been sceptical of the EU's "soft-power" policy they acknowledge that in the case of Eastern Partnership it has worked.<sup>23</sup>

Russia redoubled its efforts to bring its neighbours back under its control also on institutional front. The Kremlin established first the Eurasian Customs Union (2010) and then in 2014 the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU): both organisations required stricter commitments than previous formats of economic cooperation. Russia used a variety of economic, political and security levers to persuade Belarus and Armenia to join the EAEU, in order to maintain their trade and energy dependence on Moscow. Russia often claims that the EU is a template for the EAEU, but there have been no cases in the EU's history where a state was pressured to join the Union. Thus, the EAEU fails the primary test of voluntary economic integration between states.<sup>24</sup>

22 Stanislaw Secieru, Sinikulla Saari (eds.). The Eastern Partnership a decade on: looking back, thinking ahead. Chaillot Paper 153. EUISS, July, 2019. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/eastern-partnership-decade-looking-back-thinking-ahead>

23 Ю.А. Борко. Восточное Партнёрство: Проект, Реальность, Будущее. Доклады Института Европы No 355. Москва, 2018. <http://instituteofeurope.ru/images/uploads/doklad/355.pdf>

24 Stanislaw Secieru, Sinikulla Saari (eds.). The Eastern Partnership a decade on: looking back, thinking ahead. Chaillot

Hannes Adomeit has shown that already before the crisis in 2014 the EU attempts to persuade the Russian power elite to regard cooperation in the common neighbourhood not as a competitive game but providing 'win-win' opportunities have been to no avail. In fact, conceptual approaches and practical policies conducted vis-à-vis the three Western CIS countries (Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova) and the southern Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) confirmed then that, from Moscow's perspective, processes of democratisation, liberalisation and integration with Western institutions in that region are contrary to Russian interests. In each and every case, therefore, the area's 'frozen conflicts' have been regarded by the Kremlin as an instrument to prevent European choices in their domestic and foreign policy.<sup>25</sup>

Despite Russia's pressure, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia signed up for more advanced Association agreements with the EU in 2014. What Russia did accomplish, however, was to slow down and increase the economic costs of Europeanisation for Ukraine and Moldova. In fact, Russia's tougher approach has increased its neighbours' demands for the EU and other Western powers to have a greater role in the region's security. Russia's assertive posture seems to have even strengthened and accelerated the trend – despite the heavy costs incurred by the Eastern Partnership states. Ironically, through its military action in Georgian territory and later in Ukraine, including the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russia inadvertently forced the EU to step in and start getting involved in deploying missions and enforcing sanctions.<sup>26</sup>

## Russia and conflicts in EU Eastern Neighbourhood

### Ukraine: Donbas and Crimea

In 2014 Russia launched a campaign of violent subversion and later war to compel Ukraine to 'federalize' its political system. The war in the eastern Ukrainian region known the Donbas has now lasted seven years and despite multiple cease-fire agreements, has never really ended.

The often-violated cease-fire in eastern Ukraine stems from the **Minsk-2 Agreements**. It is a two-part deal, the second of which was signed on 12 February 2015 by Ukraine and Russia, along with Russia-backed separatists who hold parts of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions. This agreement has been the framework for subsequent attempts to end the war

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Paper 153. EUISS, July, 2019. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/eastern-partnership-decade-looking-back-thinking-ahead>

25 Hannes Adomeit. Russia and Its Near Neighbourhood: Competition and Conflict with the EU. College of Europe. Natolin Research Papers 04 /2011. <https://www.coleurope.eu/research-paper/russia-and-its-near-neighbourhood-competition-and-conflict-eu>

26 Stanislav Secrieru, Sinikulla Saari (eds.). The Eastern Partnership a decade on: looking back, thinking ahead Chaillot Paper 153. EUISS, July, 2019. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/eastern-partnership-decade-looking-back-thinking-ahead>

although the political sections of Minsk-2 are weighted heavily in Russia's favour.<sup>27</sup>

But it is not working because Ukraine and Russia have sharply differing goals.

Ukraine sees the agreements as instruments with which to re-establish its sovereignty in line with the following sequence: a ceasefire; a Russian withdrawal from eastern Ukraine; return of the Russia/Ukraine border to Ukrainian control; free and fair elections in the Donbas region; and a limited devolution of power to Russia's proxy regimes, which would be reintegrated and resubordinated to the authorities in Kyiv. Ukraine would be able to make its own domestic and foreign policy choices.<sup>28</sup>

Russia sees the Minsk agreements as tools with which to break Ukraine's sovereignty. Its interpretation reverses key elements in the sequence of actions: elections in occupied Donbas would take place before Ukraine had reclaimed control of the border; this would be followed by comprehensive autonomy under guise of federalization of Ukraine for Russia's proxy regimes, crippling the central authorities in Kyiv. In such a case, Ukraine would be unable to govern itself effectively or orient itself towards the West.<sup>29</sup>

Russian decision-makers no longer think that Ukraine will collapse imminently; getting it to assent to their version of Minsk-2 will take longer than they thought. But their underlying view of Ukraine has not fundamentally changed. In their eyes, it remains an accident of history: internally split, weak, unstable, the plaything of others – **a geopolitical battleground, not a sovereign country**. This explains why Russia has kept up **incessant pressure** – periodic military escalation, economic sanctions, information war, cyber-enabled attacks, covert meddling in Ukraine's domestic politics.<sup>30</sup>

Kremlin had probably hoped that with the election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy as Ukrainian President, who promised to bring peace it could achieve its goals in Donbas through political pressure. And in the beginning Zelenskyy made serious effort to find compromise. In the autumn of 2019, Zelenskyy agreed to so-called Steinmeier Formula, which called for the entry

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27 Duncan Allan. The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine. – Chatham House. 22.05.2020.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/05/minsk-conundrum-western-policy-and-russias-war-eastern-ukraine-0/summary>

28 Duncan Allan. The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine. – Chatham House. 22.05.2020.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/05/minsk-conundrum-western-policy-and-russias-war-eastern-ukraine-0/summary>

29 Duncan Allan. The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine. – Chatham House. 22.05.2020.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/05/minsk-conundrum-western-policy-and-russias-war-eastern-ukraine-0/summary>

30 Duncan Allan. The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine. – Chatham House. 22.05.2020.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/05/minsk-conundrum-western-policy-and-russias-war-eastern-ukraine-0/minsk-implementation>

into force of a special-status law on the same day that elections were held in Donbas.<sup>31</sup> But Moscow's hopes of achieving a favourable for Russia settlement in Ukraine with Zelenskyy have also now largely evaporated. When he was elected as Ukraine's president, there was some initial optimism in Moscow that he would prove more ready to concede on key issues in order to secure peace. Instead, Zelenskyy has refused to budge on the fundamentals of Ukrainian sovereignty in the occupied east, and has resisted Russian attempts to distance itself from the conflict.<sup>32</sup>

There were few positive outcomes for Ukraine from Zelenskyy's initiatives, two prisoner swaps took place, in September and December 2019. Moreover, the first Normandy Four summit since 2016 was held in Paris on 9 December 2019, and as the result the parties agreed to implement the ceasefire in full. The new agreement took effect on 27 July 2020 and lasted till March 2021.<sup>33</sup>

For the past two years, Moscow has been slowly but steadily distributing **Russian passports** to Ukrainians living in the regions of eastern Ukraine currently under Kremlin control. According to Russia's Interior Ministry says that more than 527,000 people in parts of eastern Ukraine where Moscow-backed separatist formations are waging a war against Kyiv have been granted Russian citizenship over the past two years.<sup>34</sup> This effort to transform occupied eastern Ukraine into a "passport protectorate" gives a clear indication of Russia's long-term objectives in its war with Ukraine. It confirms fears that Russia intends to use its newly minted citizens in eastern Ukraine in order to justify further interventions in regions it has informally occupied for the past seven years.<sup>35</sup>

As there has not been enough trade-offs from Ukrainian side, Russia has now decided to **increase pressure** on Ukraine. Since fighting first erupted in eastern Ukraine in 2014, the Kremlin has sought to maintain a veil of plausible deniability by deploying limited numbers of conventional troops alongside hybrid forces comprised of mercenaries, volunteers, and local collaborators. Starting from March 2021, there's was a massive deployment of Russian troops close to Ukraine's borders and into Crimea, which Russia seized in March 2014,<sup>36</sup>

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31 Duncan Allan. The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine. – Chatham House. 22.05.2020. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/05/minsk-conundrum-western-policy-and-russias-war-eastern-ukraine-0/minsk-implementation>

32 Peter Dickinson. Is Putin about to launch a new offensive in Ukraine? – Atlantic Council Report. 04.04.2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-putin-about-to-launch-a-new-offensive-in-ukraine/>

33 Breaking the pattern: the relative success of the latest ceasefire agreement in Ukraine. – ACLED. 24.11.2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/breaking-pattern-relative-success-latest-ceasefire-agreement-ukraine>

34 Russia Says Half A Million Passports Issued In Eastern Ukraine In Last Two Years RFE/RL May 02, 2021 <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-russia-issues-half-million-passports-2-years/31234248.html>

35 Peter Dickinson. Russian passports: Putin's secret weapon in the war against Ukraine. – Atlantic Council. 13.04.2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russian-passports-putins-secret-weapon-in-the-war-against-ukraine/>

36 Mike Eckel. The Guns of April: Six Questions About The New Russia-Ukraine Tensions. – RFE/RL. 07.04.2021.

which according to Kyiv included in peak time some 110,000 Russian troops<sup>37</sup>. The number of Russian military units in Ukrainian borders was by the end of April on the highest levels since the end of open hostilities on 2014 according to Ukrainian, USA and EU sources.<sup>38</sup>

**The military build-up** raised fears in Ukraine and West of a possible Russian offensive that could push beyond the areas of eastern Ukraine currently under Kremlin control and lead to a dramatic escalation in the simmering seven-year conflict between the two countries. This prospect alarmed European countries, so German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron held a video-conference with Putin on March 2021 to pressure Russia to back off.<sup>39</sup> In April 2021 the US President Joseph Biden called to Russian President Vladimir Putin and emphasized the United States' unwavering commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and voiced concerns over the sudden Russian military build-up and called on Russia to de-escalate tensions.<sup>40</sup>

However, a day after President Vladimir Putin, in an annual state-of-the-nation address, Russia ordered some of its troops to pull back from the border with Ukraine, easing fears in Europe of a possible war. But Russia has left up to 80 000 soldiers and some military equipment in store field camps near the border with Ukraine's Donbas region, which makes possible assembling new force there in short time. Satellite images have shown hundreds of trucks and tanks in the area.<sup>41</sup>

In Ukraine, many had feared that the build-up could be the prelude to a Russian annexation of separatist-controlled eastern Ukraine or an outright invasion. For the moment, at least, the withdrawal announcement signalled that such a move was not imminent.<sup>42</sup>

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<https://www.rferl.org/a/six-questions-russia-ukraine-military-buildup/31191350.html>

37 Andrew E. Kramer and Anton Troianovski. Russia Orders Partial Pullback From Ukraine Border Region. – The New York Times. 23.04.2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/22/world/europe/russia-ukraine-military-pullback.html>

38 Alexandra Odynova. Ukraine says Russia has moved 80,000 troops to border and Crimea, and Putin won't talk. – CBS News. 12.04.2021.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russia-ukraine-news-putin-moves-russian-troops-to-border-and-crimea/>;

Jeff Seldin. Bigger Than 2014: US Calls Out Russian Military Buildup Along Ukraine Border. – Reuters. 19.04.2021.

<https://www.voanews.com/usa/bigger-2014-us-calls-out-russian-military-buildup-along-ukraine-border>;

Russia: Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EP debate. – EAAS. 28.04.2021.

[https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/97446/russia-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ep-debate\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/97446/russia-speech-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-ep-debate_en)

39 Pavel K. Baev. War Scare Is Putin's Natural Element. – Eurasia Daily Monitor. 05.04.2021. Volume 18, Issue 5.

<https://jamestown.org/program/war-scare-is-putins-natural-element/>

40 Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia. 13.04.2021.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/13/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-call-with-president-vladimir-putin-of-russia-4-13/>

41 Joseph Choi. Russia keeping 80K troops at border amid NATO exercise, US officials say. – The Hill. 05.05.2021.

<https://thehill.com/policy/international/russia/551996-russia-keeping-80k-troops-at-border-amid-nato-exercise-us>

42 Andrew E. Kramer and Anton Troianovski. Russia Orders Partial Pullback From Ukraine Border Region. – The New York Times. 23.04.2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/22/world/europe/russia-ukraine-military-pullback.html>

Moscow's immediate political objective with military escalation was probably to coerce Ukraine back into compliance with the July 2020 agreement on Additional Measures to Strengthen the Ceasefire. Specifically, Ukraine must enshrine the concept of a special status for the Donetsk-Luhansk territory in the Ukrainian constitution and to incorporate the so-called Steinmeier Formula into Ukraine's legislation.<sup>43</sup>

Complicating factor could be Franco-German document on implementing the Minsk agreements "Key Clusters for Carrying out the Minsk Agreements".<sup>44</sup> It could be in Russian interests to force Ukraine to submit to this proposal or more probably to Russian counterproposal conditions, as they were also leaked to press by Russian officials.

Another reason for escalation could have been internal Ukrainian development. In February 2021, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy took off the air three pro-Russian television channels connected to the pro-Russian Opposition Platform–For Life party, Kyiv also imposed sanctions on the leader of the pro-Russian opposition, Viktor Medvedchuk, who was accused of "financing terrorists"—paying the Donbas separatists money.<sup>45</sup>

Russia could also be nervous over new Ukrainian initiative Crimean Platform. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian government are preparing to host a summit of heads of state and government in August 2021, aiming to mobilize a more effective international response to Russia's seizure of Crimea from Ukraine, as Russia has been totally opposed to discussing Crimean issue either internationally or bilaterally with Ukraine. The summit is planned to inaugurate the "Crimea Platform," a multi-level framework for devising actions that would raise the costs of Russia's occupation and contradict Moscow's thesis about the irreversibility of its hold on the peninsula.<sup>46</sup> Moscow has at the same time failed to resolve the enduring water insecurity issues in Crimea, which it pledged to address by the summer of 2021, after Kyiv cut off water supplies to the peninsula.<sup>47</sup> Russia's recent troop movements and rhetoric suggest it has become impatient and is trying to squeeze Ukraine into making concessions.

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43 Vladimir Socor. Yermak's Earlier Giveaways Come Back to Haunt Zelenskyy and Ukraine. – Eurasia Daily Monitor. 25.03.2021. Volume 18, Issue 49.

<https://jamestown.org/program/yermaks-earlier-giveaways-come-back-to-haunt-zelenskyy-and-ukraine/>

44 Vladimir Socor. Franco-German Proposals in the Normandy Forum: A Letdown to Ukraine. – Eurasia Daily Monitor. 30.03.2021. Volume 18, Issue 51.

<https://jamestown.org/program/franco-german-proposals-in-the-normandy-forum-a-letdown-to-ukraine/>

45 Yuri Lapaiev . Turning up the Conflict Dial: The Political Reasons Behind the Resumed Fighting in Donbas. – Eurasia Daily Monitor. 24.03. 2021. Volume 18, Issue 48.

<https://jamestown.org/program/turning-up-the-conflict-dial-the-political-reasons-behind-the-resumed-fighting-in-donbas/>

46 Vladimir Socor. Crimea Platform: Ukraine's Initiative to Raise the Costs of Russia's Occupation. – Eurasia Daily Monitor. 15.02.2021. Volume 18, Issue 25.

<https://jamestown.org/program/crimea-platform-ukraines-initiative-to-raise-the-costs-of-russias-occupation/>

47 Liana Semchuk Ukraine and Russia: why troop build-up unlikely to lead to all-out war. – The Conversation.

16.04.2021 <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-and-russia-why-troop-build-up-unlikely-to-lead-to-all-out-war-157634>

It is probable therefore that Russia's goal during military escalation in February-April 2021 was more limited, scaring Ukraine to accept Russian conditions for Donbas. Moscow's goal is not only to intimidate, but to show that the conflict cannot be "frozen" without significant political concessions or compromises from Ukraine. It could be also aimed as a signal to the new Biden administration in USA and also Germany and France nearing elections that Russia retains strong coercive power, can escalate conflict at will.<sup>48</sup>

However, according to some analysts, Putin faces parliamentary elections in September with his approval ratings down and support for his United Russia political party collapsing. A military intervention in nearby Ukraine could act for example as a convenient distraction and serve to revitalize Putin's personal popularity.<sup>49</sup> But the potential economic costs that such an intervention would bring are likely to be too great, especially ahead of the crucial State Duma elections in September, where raising social benefits are expected to be main issue. On 15 April 2021 Washington imposed new sanctions on Russia that place restrictions on buying new sovereign debt. This is a significant step, because it shows Biden is prepared to back his Russian directed rhetoric with action.<sup>50</sup>

Russian military power demonstration could also show intention from Moscow to "defend Russian citizens" in eastern Ukraine that could foreshadow plans to incorporate the Donbas region into the Russian Federation via an annexation similar to the 2014 takeover of Crimea. However, this would entail major costs for the Kremlin with limited benefits. The regions in question are already under actual Moscow's control and eastern Ukraine does not excite Russian public opinion in the same manner as Crimea, and Russian public sees that support to Crimea and Donbas costs enormous sums, that could be better used solving Russia's internal problems.<sup>51</sup>

It is possible that Russia will return to military pressure in context of preparation and conduct of Zapad 2021 military exercises lasting till September 2021. Taking into account of size of recent concentration of Russian military forces on Ukrainian borders even all-out war scenario cannot be totally excluded, although it should be considered presently less likely scenario. Another possible scenario would be the Russian military entering occupied eastern Ukraine in the guise of "peacekeepers" in order to protect the large local population of Russian citizens. Once in place, this "peacekeeping force" would be almost impossible to

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48 Sarah Rainsford. Why Russia may not be planning the invasion that Ukraine fears. – BBC News. 16.04.2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56746144>

Michael Kofman. Russia's Military Buildup Near Ukraine Is an Intimidation Tactic. – Moscow Times. 03.04. 2021. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/04/03/russian-military-build-up-near-ukraine-is-an-intimidation-tactic-a73461>

49 Peter Dickinson. Is Putin about to launch a new offensive in Ukraine? – Atlantic Council Report. 04.04.2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-putin-about-to-launch-a-new-offensive-in-ukraine/>

50 Liana Semchuk. Ukraine and Russia: why troop build-up unlikely to lead to all-out war. – The Conversation. 16.04.2021. <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-and-russia-why-troop-build-up-unlikely-to-lead-to-all-out-war-157634>

51 Peter Dickinson. Russian passports: Putin's secret weapon in the war against Ukraine. – Atlantic Council. 13.04.2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russian-passports-putins-secret-weapon-in-the-war-against-ukraine/>

dislodge.<sup>52</sup> The other aim of Russian military intervention might be also to seize the canal in Kherson Oblast taking water from the Dnipro River to Crimea.<sup>53</sup>

## Belarus

The 2020 Belarusian presidential election was held on 9 August 2020. According to official results Alexander Lukashenka was re-elected to the sixth term in office, with 80% of the vote. Opposition candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya claimed to have won a decisive first-round victory with at least 60% of the vote, and called on Lukashenka to start negotiations. Her campaign subsequently formed the Coordination Council to facilitate a transfer of power and stated that it was ready to organize “long-term protests” against the official results. The Coordination Council issued Lukashenka an ultimatum to cease all repression, free detainees and step down from the presidency. Thousands of people started to protest on a daily basis for months, with numbers amounting to the hundreds of thousands during the fall 2020. Due to harsh repressions and cold weather number of demonstrations have decreased during the winter 2020/2021. The main demands of the opposition continue to be the resignation of Lukashenka, the release of all political prisoners and unlawfully arrested protesters, and new, free and fair elections to be observed by the international community.

Russian reaction to events in Belarus has been dictated from one side with aversion of colour revolutions and need to uphold Belarus as a member of the Union State and from another with calculation that it weakens Lukashenka, who has not been easy partner for Putin.

For two decades, Putin and Lukashenka have now been what could be called “frenemies”. Belarus has acquired substantial economic benefits from Russia, notably subsidised, below-market prices for oil and natural gas imports. Meanwhile, Putin has aimed to keep Belarus within Russia’s orbit. In the current situation, however, Lukashenka faces a choice between losing power completely or increasing his reliance on Russia.<sup>54</sup>

For the Kremlin, the situation is also complicated as providing full support to Lukashenka, against the wishes of many Belarussian citizens, and has led to raising anti-Russian sentiment. At the same time Putin cannot allow the people of Belarus to overthrow their

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52 Peter Dickinson. Russian passports: Putin’s secret weapon in the war against Ukraine. – Atlantic Council. 13.04.2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russian-passports-putins-secret-weapon-in-the-war-against-ukraine/>

53 Peter Dickinson. Is Putin about to launch a new offensive in Ukraine? – Atlantic Council Report. 04.04.2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-putin-about-to-launch-a-new-offensive-in-ukraine/>

54 Oleg Chupryna. Lukashenko, Putin and the protests: Why Belarus is being pulled further into Russia’s orbit. – LSE. 02.12.2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/12/02/lukashenko-putin-and-the-protests-why-belarus-is-being-pulled-further-into-russias-orbit/>

autocratic leader, not least because this would provide an unwanted example for his own citizens. Yet on the other hand, direct involvement in the suppression of protests could have a devastating effect on public opinion on Belarus toward Russia.<sup>55</sup>

Consequently, it is likely that Putin sensed an opportunity arising from the current internal situation in Belarus. Lukashenka's previous reservations vis-à-vis the Union State might fade away in the face of his potential ousting by his own people. The worse the situation gets, the more desperate he will become to get help from Putin and the more willing he will be to accept deeper integration between Belarus and Russia.<sup>56</sup>

Russia therefore does not feel an immediate urge to protect its zone of influence. The result of the protests on long term is still unknown and even if there is change of leadership, there is a fair chance Russia will be able to strike a deal with whoever replaces him, taking into account that some opposition figures also have links to Moscow. From Russian point of view the ties between Russia and Belarus are extremely strong and Belarus is dependent of Moscow's economic aid, which gives Moscow a strong say in Belarus politics.<sup>57</sup>

Russia, which has long sought permanent military bases in Belarus, has increased its military activity in and around Belarus in 2020–2021.<sup>58</sup> Russia and Belarus are already linked closely militarily. They have an integrated air- and missile-defense system, plus a regional group of forces comprised of four Belarusian brigades and special forces and the Russian 20th Guards Army. Moreover, Belarus is a member of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). On the ground in Belarus, Russia leases two military sites. Since 2015, the Kremlin has been pressuring its Western neighbour to host a new Russian airbase on its territory. His hold on power tenable, Lukashenka may be amenable to an air base, plus extending the leases on the other two facilities, which are due to expire in June 2021.<sup>59</sup>

Recent reports that Russia and Belarus are planning to hold a record number of joint military exercises this year. The majority of the 2021 military drills will take place in the runup to Zapad-2021, The two countries' forces will be focusing on establishing "a logistical base" to facilitate supply lines to support Russian troops for an extended period. The Zapad

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55 Oleg Chupryna. Lukashenko, Putin and the protests: Why Belarus is being pulled further into Russia's orbit. – LSE. 02.12.2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/12/02/lukashenko-putin-and-the-protests-why-belarus-is-being-pulled-further-into-russias-orbit/>

56 Agnieszka Widlaszewska. Why So Silent? Russia's restraint in reaction to mass protests in Belarus. – Lossi 36. 02.10.2020. <https://lossi36.com/2020/10/02/why-so-silent-russias-restraint-in-reaction-to-mass-protests-in-belarus/>

57 Agnieszka Widlaszewska. Why So Silent? Russia's restraint in reaction to mass protests in Belarus. – Lossi 36. 02.10.2020. <https://lossi36.com/2020/10/02/why-so-silent-russias-restraint-in-reaction-to-mass-protests-in-belarus/>

58 Brian Whitmore. Is Russia slowly annexing Belarus in plain sight? – Atlantic Council. 10.02.2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-russia-slowly-annexing-belarus-in-plain-sight/>

59 Tony Wesolowsky. Russian Military Creep In Belarus Raises Security Alarms. – RFE/RL. 04.10.2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-military-creep-in-belarus-raises-security-alarms/30874178.html>

2021 exercises will likely support Putin's efforts to establish a continuous Russian military presence in Belarus.<sup>60</sup>

Putin has in public continued to embrace Belarus leader, has meetings with him and had promised aid. Following Lukashenka's request he has created a "reserve group of law enforcement personnel" ready to support their Belarusian counterparts, with condition that they would not be used "unless the situation becomes uncontrollable" and "extremist elements overstep the mark. In terms of material support Lukashenka has not received much.<sup>61</sup> In the meeting on 22 April 2021 after the announcement of so-called "coup attempt" against Lukashenka, Lukashenka integrated moving forward with security in the framework of Union State, saying that pressing issues must be resolved, including security and defence in of Union State.<sup>62</sup>

President Alexander Lukashenka has promised that a new draft constitution for Belarus will be drawn up in 2021.<sup>63</sup> Lukashenka hopes clearly hopes that inauguration a new constitution could be a solution to a political crisis but the opposition rejects it as a sham. To take advantage of those possible coming changes, the new pro-Russian political party Sayus ("Union") was established in Belarus 6 March 2021.<sup>64</sup> The statement of the organizing committee of the party notes that the Sayuz party plans to promote the development of Belarusian-Russian integration and strengthen the civilization of the "Russian world". Sayuz also calls on the official Minsk to recognize Crimea as Russian territory and recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>65</sup>

## Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh war

Although Russia has been traditionally seen as a protector of Armenia in its relations with Azerbaijan, and Armenia is a member of Russian led EAEU and CSTO, Russia has been less

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60 Brian Whitmore. Is Russia slowly annexing Belarus in plain sight? – Atlantic Council. 10.02.2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-russia-slowly-annexing-belarus-in-plain-sight/>

61 Agnieszka Widlaszewska. Why So Silent? Russia's restraint in reaction to mass protests in Belarus. – Lossi 36. 02.10.2020. <https://lossi36.com/2020/10/02/why-so-silent-russias-restraint-in-reaction-to-mass-protests-in-belarus/>

62 Meeting with President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko. 22.04.2021. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65428>

63 Tom Balmforth. Lukashenko promises new Belarus draft constitution by end of this year. – Reuters. 10.01.2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-idUSKBN29F0AV>

64 В Беларуси создана пророссийская партия "Союз". – Deutsche Welle. 06.03.2021. <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-belarusi-sozdana-prorossijskaja-partija-sojuz/a-56794564>

65 Pro-Russian party planned for Belarus. – Belsat TV. 24.10.2020. <https://belsat.eu/en/news/pro-russian-party-planned-for-belarus/>

supportive since the 2018 Velvet Revolution brought Nikol Pashinyan into power. Although Pashinyan went to great lengths to assure Russia that he will continue to follow pro-Russian foreign policy, he clearly has enjoyed less support from Kremlin than previous Armenian leaders.

Over the last two decades, the Kremlin had seen that, with a petrodollar-fuelled Azeri defence budget three times the size of Armenia's, the balance of power has been inexorably tilting towards Azerbaijan. Moscow tried to pressure Armenia to accept a diplomatic settlement brokered by Russia, the US and France, but the Armenian side refused to make concessions. Before the second Nagorno-Karabakh war in Fall 2020, Russia continued to sell arms to Armenia, while also arming Azerbaijan at the same time. The war ended with catastrophic defeat for Armenia and loss of most of Azerbaijani territory that it had gained control as a result of 1994 first Nagorno Karabakh war.

The important feature of this war was, that while Russia declined to help Armenia directly, claiming that CSTO commitments only apply to internationally recognised territory, the Russia did not react to Turkey's significant support of Azerbaijani side, especially arming them with latest drone weaponry.<sup>66</sup>

The war ended with Russia brokered 9 November 2020 ceasefire agreement. Using a mixture of diplomacy and pressure, Moscow secured a peace deal that turns a conflict in which there were no good options for the Kremlin, into a situation that helped to boost Russia's leverage. Russian The Russian troops will be the only peacekeepers monitoring the implementation of the agreement, with no Turkish or any other boots on the ground - although Turkey can send observers. But Moscow's diplomatic victory came with a price. The war has shown the growth of Turkish influence in the Caucasus, and Moscow no longer looks like the only major power in the region.<sup>67</sup> Ceasefire agreement was signed in Moscow, facilitated by the Russian Federation, but with Turkey also being kept informed.

The three signatories were Russia Armenia and Azerbaijan. While Turkey was excluded from the ceasefire agreement, a Joint Russian-Turkish Centre for Monitoring the Ceasefire in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Zone was set up in January 2021.<sup>68</sup>

The agreement prescribed the immediate cessation of armed hostilities along the current line of contact. This prevented the complete destruction of the surviving Armenian forces. The ceasefire ordered the swift return of the three Armenian-occupied districts around Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, which had not yet been seized by the Azerbaijani forces during the war. At the same time, some 70% of the territory of the former Nagorno-Karabakh

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66 Alexander Gabuev. Viewpoint: Russia and Turkey - unlikely victors of Karabakh conflict. Carnegie Moscow Center. – BBC News. 12.11.2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54903869>

67 Alexander Gabuev. Viewpoint: Russia and Turkey - unlikely victors of Karabakh conflict. Carnegie Moscow Center. – BBC News. 12.11.2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54903869>

68 András Rácz. In Russia's hands. – EUISS brief. 08.04.2021. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/russias-hands>

Autonomous Oblast was to remain in Armenian hands, but in fact controlled by Russian “peacekeepers”.<sup>69</sup>

Russian peacekeepers now secure not only the parts of Nagorno-Karabakh that are still controlled by Armenia, but also the Lachin/Berdzor corridor, which is likely to remain the sole, permanently open land connection between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. Final political settlement of status of Nagorno Karabakh was promised to be agreed in future.<sup>70</sup>

Important weakness of the ceasefire agreement is that there is no political settlement attached to it. The official Azerbaijani position since the end of the war has been coherent and rigid: all the regions still controlled by Armenia constitute integral parts of the territories of Azerbaijan, thus Baku is not interested in granting any form of cultural or other autonomy to the Armenian population. This leaves Karabakh Armenians with no other realistic – both from the political and existential points of view – option than to rely on the security provided by the Russian peacekeeping contingent.<sup>71</sup>

Moscow believes Yerevan has no realistic options other than continuing to rely on Russia to guarantee its security. A possible by-product of the Armenian defeat in war might be the fall of Pashinyan’s government, but who won’t be missed by the Kremlin.<sup>72</sup> The Armenia’s beleaguered Prime Minister declared snap elections to be on 20 of June 2021 and presently his party still is most popular. However, Moscow believes that due to present links and geopolitical necessity it could achieve its goals in Armenia with either Pashinyan or his opposition in power.

The deployment of Russian troops into Azerbaijan deserves special attention, because there is a theoretical possibility that it may lead to a new ‘freezing’ of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution process, instead of politically settling the conflict itself. The core problem is that should Moscow decide to keep its troops on Azeri soil even after their original five-year mandate expires, it is unlikely that Azerbaijan could prevent such a scenario.<sup>73</sup>

## Moldova

For Moldovan security, situation remains complex in **Transnistria**, a breakaway region of Moldova in which ethnic Russians and Ukrainians together outnumber ethnic Moldovans.

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69 András Rácz. In Russia’s hands. – EUISS brief. 08.04.2021. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/russias-hands>

70 András Rácz. In Russia’s hands. – EUISS brief. 08.04.2021. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/russias-hands>

71 András Rácz. In Russia’s hands. – EUISS brief. 08.04.2021. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/russias-hands>

72 Alexander Gabuev. Viewpoint: Russia and Turkey - unlikely victors of Karabakh conflict. Carnegie Moscow Center. – BBC News. 12.11.2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54903869>

73 András Rácz. In Russia’s hands. – EUISS brief. 08.04.2021. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/russias-hands>

The separatist enclave has enjoyed de facto independence since a brief military conflict in 1992, though it is internationally recognized as a part of Moldova. Its government and economy are heavily dependent on subsidies from Russia. Transnistria now hosts at least 1,500 Russian so called “peacekeepers” on its territory.<sup>74</sup>

Moldova’s long-time goal is reintegration of Transnistria with Moldova.

To find solution to end the conflict is sought by OSCE led **5+2 format**, which includes representatives of Moldova, Transnistria, the OSCE, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, the European Union and the United States. However, not much progress has been made over the years. The goal of the 5+2 talks is to work out the parameters of a comprehensive settlement based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognized borders with a special status for Transnistria within Moldova.<sup>75</sup>

For many years by now, Moscow has pushed for its “unification” plan to permanently clutch Moldova in its sphere of influence by granting Transnistria huge influence on both foreign and security policy of the whole state. This has plan was supported by former president Igor Dodon and the socialist party.<sup>76</sup>

Immediately after the presidential elections in 2020, the new President Maia Sandu announced that her goal is the withdrawal Russian troops from Transnistria and replacing them with OSCE observers.<sup>77</sup> In reaction, Russia stated that Sandu’s decisions (demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops, changing the status of the Russian language) will complicate the solution of the Transnistrian problem.<sup>78</sup> Diverging views of the Moldova and Russia show that there is no hope for achieving positive solution to Transnistrian issue in the near future and possibility for escalating conflict remains option for Russia.

## Georgia and Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Since 2008 Russian-Georgian war, approximately one-fifth of Georgia’s territory is occupied by Russia. Russian occupation weakens Georgia’s sovereignty and the autonomy to

74 Transnistria. – Freedom House. 2020. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/transnistria/freedom-world/2020>

75 Press releases and statements related to the 5+2 negotiations on the Transdniestrian settlement process. – OSCE Mission to Moldova <https://www.osce.org/mission-to-moldova/119488>

76 Moldova’s Sandu on Withdrawing Russian Forces from Transnistria. – Russia Monitor. 30.11.2020. <https://warsawinstitute.org/moldovas-sandu-withdrawing-russian-forces-transnistria/>

77 Moldova’s new president calls for Russian troops to withdraw from territory. – BBC News. 30.11.2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55135213>

78 Moscow says call to leave Moldovan breakaway region ‘irresponsible’. – EURACTIV.com with AFP. 02.12.2020. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/moscow-says-call-to-leave-moldovan-breakaway-region-irresponsible/>

pursue its foreign policy goals. After Russian victory in the 2008 Russian – Georgian war, Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as “independent states”. The international community, including the United States and the European Union condemned the recognition stating that it violates Georgia’s territorial integrity. Abkhazia and South Ossetia explicitly decline to reunite with Georgian territory, with LO being in favour of uniting with Russia, while Abkhazia wanting on to hold to independent status. At the same time the Georgia has no intention to give up its sovereign territory. During this stalemate, Russia has established patronage over Abkhazia and South Ossetia and started issuing Russian passports for the inhabitants of both regions, which could point to possible plans of annexation in future. Although with little progress, negotiations over the conflict resolution take place at the Geneva International Discussions. As of now, Abkhazia and South Ossetia continue in effect be occupied by Russia, and the conflicts are frozen with potential for Russia to heat them up again.<sup>79</sup>

## Conclusion

As has been shown in this analysis, there **has not been any fundamental change in Russian foreign policy towards the EU Neighbourhood Policy and common neighbourhood countries**. There are some signs that some adaptation to less assertive stance to some crises has taken place, but these developments **have not changed the fundamental goals and methods of Russian foreign policy**.

Instead, Russia has shown continuing readiness to interfere, both with economic and military instruments into internal affairs of neighbouring states. However, there could be seen emerging **tactical differing policy attitude from Russia towards neighbours** who have chosen Western democratic and pro-EU/pro-Western direction of development and are supported by EU and USA.

1) In the **first case (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova)**, Russia’s goal is to **weaken position of those countries through economic pressure and military interventions**, with the goal of denying them realistic chance to become more closely aligned with EU and in long term to deny them a realistic chance of EU and NATO membership. This approach includes creating and maintaining “frozen” and “hot” conflicts on their territories. Russia continues to resist and interfere with the impact of the EU Neighbourhood policy and NATO’s efforts to develop security cooperation with those countries.

However, the Russian aggression of 2008 in Georgia and 2014 in Ukraine and its unwillingness to solve Transnistrian issue in Moldova (developments that have resulted in the effective seizure of sovereign territories of these states) although they provided Russia with hefty

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<sup>79</sup> Giorgi Buzaladze. The Spectrum of Georgia’s Policy Options Towards Abkhazia and South Osseti. – E-International Relations. 02.03.2020.

<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/03/02/the-spectrum-of-georgias-policy-options-towards-abkhazia-and-south-ossetia/>

immediate gains, nevertheless produced long-term troubles for Moscow. The methods the Kremlin used to exert pressure on Georgia and Ukraine had for Russia “unintended consequences”: the seizure of territories by Russia pushed Kyiv and Tbilisi closer to the West, anti-Russian sentiment among both populations became the norm, and pro-Russian forces were marginalized. This probably has led Russian leadership to consider more carefully what instrument to use to achieve their goals toward neighbouring states.

2) In the **second case** we see **more restrained policy attitude** developing towards those neighbours (**Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia**), that do not have realistic geopolitical alternative to Russian support and therefore continue to follow pro-Russian foreign policy, and are willing to work in Russian lead integration projects like EAEU or have autocratic government and or as minimum do not intend to build Western orientated democracy. **In crises of those countries Russia has not get directly involved** in some internal or interstate conflicts (2018 revolution in Armenia, no direct interference in Belarus so far no direct military involvement during Nagorno-Karabakh war). It has even shown readiness to some extent share influence, in Azerbaijan with increasingly autocratic Turkey, like it does in Central Asia with autocratic China.

In the crises discussed above, Moscow maintained its core strategic interests and even managed to use those states’ internal difficulties to increase its own influence. The post-war crisis in Armenia made Armenia and Azerbaijan country far more dependent on Moscow, particularly as Russian “peacekeepers” are now stationed in Karabakh. In fact, as a resulted the crisis Russia has actually managed to increase its military presence both in Armenia and Azerbaijan. A similar growth of dependence is observable in Lukashenka’s case.

Unlike in Ukraine and Georgia, Western influence in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, has been meagre. Had anti-Russian sentiments grown dangerous to Moscow’s core interests in those three states, it might have opted for more traditional active military responses. Russia responded moderately simply because it did not face a direct threat.

However, Russian leadership has had a hard time striking a balance between cooperation and domination in bilateral ties with the neighbours as well as within Russia-led alliances. Moscow has a preference to hierarchical element in its relations with its neighbours, and it tries to establish a semblance of inclusiveness with those neighbours via the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, rebuilding Russia’s image as a global power runs counter to what Moscow needs most: neighbours’ trust. This explains why the EAEU and CSTO have not been particularly successful integration vehicles. Indeed, as these crises show, the Kremlin has been more successful using bilateral rather than multilateral mechanisms to promote its core interests.

Recent military escalation in March-April 2021 at Russian-Ukrainian border clearly shows that Russia is willing to threaten and perhaps to use again military force to achieve its political goals when it sees its perceived vital interests threatened. The most logical explanation is

that the July 2020 ceasefire broke down because Russia seeks to pressure Ukraine, and Western counterparts, over the lack of progress in implementing favorable to Russia Minsk II Agreement. Moscow's goal is not only to intimidate, but to show that the conflict cannot be "frozen" without significant political concessions or compromises. If Russia sees that Ukraine is not ready to accept its terms not only regarding Donbas but also regarding control of Ukraine's development path in general (especially regarding closer relations with EU and NATO), it is ready to threaten and also possibly use military force.

Today's situation between Russia and Ukraine poses the greatest immediate risks for escalation not only between those countries but also between Russia and the West. The way forward from Western powers should entail a mix of deterrence and dialogue to convince Russia to return to the July 2020 Minsk ceasefire deal, and Moscow and Kyiv to return to peace talks. One way to increase support for Ukraine is also to engage with Ukrainian Crimean Platform initiative.

**Russian continuing aggressive foreign policy gives the EU little choice but to continue with present containment policies toward Russia.** It is paramount importance that the EU countries maintain political unity in supporting measures to contain Russia and prevent further aggression against its neighbours. It is advisable for EU countries to **continue to follow the five principles guiding EU-Russia relations** from 2016, of which two in fact deal more with the eastern neighbours than with Russia, namely:

- Implementation of the Minsk agreement as the key condition for any substantial change in the EU's stance towards Russia;
- Strengthened relations with the EU's Eastern Partners and other neighbours, in particular in Central Asia;
- Strengthening the resilience of the EU (for example energy security, hybrid threats, or strategic communication);
- Need for selective engagement with Russia on the issues of interest to the EU;
- Need to engage in people-to-people contacts and support Russian civil society.<sup>80</sup>

As long as Russia's behaviour does not change, neither should EU approach. **The EU should work with USA, UK and other Western countries to implement effective containment policy.** Also, the **sanction regime against Russia should continue** and **more aid should be given to Eastern Partnership countries** to help them deal with hybrid threats.

Further non-military options to pressure Russia include, for example, banning borrowing by and cooperation with export-oriented Russian energy and metallurgical companies

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80 EU Foreign Affairs Council. Main results. 14.03.2016. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2016/03/14/>

and state-controlled banks, cutting Russia off from the SWIFT banking network and further limiting Russian access to Western financing through prohibitions on buying Russian sovereign debt on the secondary market.<sup>81</sup> Western powers and NATO must also continue with direct military and security assistance to Ukraine to prevent the renewed Russian military aggression.

The Estonian Center for Eastern Partnership (ECEAP) does not take collective positions. This analytic paper, like all publications of the ECEAP, represents only the views of its author.

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81 International Crisis Group Statement: Responding to the New Crisis on Ukraine's Borders. 20.04.2021.  
<https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine/responding-new-crisis-ukraines-borders>