

## WHOSE RULES, WHOSE SPHERE? RUSSIAN GOVERNANCE AND INFLUENCE IN POST-SOVIET STATES

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### INTRODUCTION

In his March 18, 2014, address following Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian territory of Crimea, Russian President Vladimir Putin outlined Russia's historical claims over the peninsula and its Russian-speaking population.<sup>1</sup> He then proceeded to liken Russia's reaction to the Western-backed protests that toppled former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich to geopolitical recoil: "If you compress the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard."<sup>2</sup> He denounced the West's hypocrisy, its support for Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, NATO's expansion, U.S. interventions in Afghanistan and the Middle East, and the West's support for destabilizing "democratic revolutions" such as the Arab Spring—all of which he implicitly connected to the standoff between Russia and the West over Ukraine.

For Western observers and most Ukrainians, this litany of post-Cold War grievances seemed completely unrelated to Putin's Ukrainian gambit,

a textbook case of international aggression. After all, Russia had clearly violated the basic security norms of post-Cold War Europe—the sanctity of internationally recognized sovereign borders—by annexing Crimea and destabilizing parts of eastern Ukraine through instigating and supporting a separatist insurgency. In doing so, Russia reneged on its own obligations to preserve Ukraine's territorial integrity that it had made when signing the Budapest memorandum (in 1994) and the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership (in 1997).<sup>3</sup>

But for Moscow, the crisis in Ukraine was the apex of a broader clash with the West over what principles, rules, and actors should govern the orientation of the post-Soviet states, known in Russia as its "near abroad."<sup>4</sup> Russia's assertion of its right to take decisive action in Ukraine was justified precisely because it believes it enjoys a "privileged sphere of influence" in the post-Soviet space, and that Western encouragement of the

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Ukrainian Euromaidan protests undermined Russia's privileged interests in its immediate neighborhood. Maintaining such a sphere of influence is key to firming up the Putin system domestically, allowing Russian leaders to justify their perception of Russia as a great power in what they view as an emerging multipolar world. Thus, the Ukraine crisis was as much about Russia's reaction to the encroachment of Western-led globalization and institutions as it was about the actual fate of Ukraine.<sup>5</sup>

This raises a question: What exactly does Russia want in Ukraine and the other post-Soviet states, and how does it seek to influence the political development of its immediate neighbors? To simply assert, as many Western observers find convenient, that the Russian president seeks to reconstitute the Soviet Union with Russia at its center obscures the wide variety of instruments, actors, and norms through which Moscow actually exerts its influence in the region and potentially beyond. Russia is unlikely to reconstitute the USSR anytime soon; leaders of all former Soviet states, including some of Russia's closest allies, push back and hedge against Moscow's overt attempts to advance broad-based political reintegration. But, Moscow has many tools at its disposal to influence the political, economic, social, and foreign policy trajectories of its neighbors, even if it will not be able to rebuild an imperial state.

How does Russia do this? In some cases, Russia intervenes directly, as it has done in Ukraine and Georgia, where it has established, taken advantage of, and sought to maintain territorial conflicts. In other instances, Moscow has pursued its economic and security objectives via bilateral arrangements with its neighbors or through new, modern-style regional organizations, like the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO); it also actively resists Western actors, their values, institutions,

and norms by shielding post-Soviet governments from external criticism and promoting backlash against Western-style liberalism. This publication examines these main categories through which Russia exerts pressure and influence on former Soviet states and offers policy guidelines for Russia's neighbors and Western partners.

## **FROZEN CONFLICTS AND DIVIDED POLITIES**

Russia exerts its influence in Eurasia by taking advantage of—and most recently in Ukraine, establishing—frozen conflicts. Moldova, Georgia, Armenia/Azerbaijan, and Ukraine all have unresolved territorial conflicts, usually divided along ethnic lines, between a sovereign state and a breakaway region(s) that is either directly or indirectly supported by Russia.<sup>6</sup> In Moldova and Georgia, this was the direct result of ethnic and civil conflicts that occurred during and immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, when new national leaders attempted to consolidate statehood along ethnic lines—moves that were resisted by political leaders and large segments of the breakaway regions' populations.

The case of Nagorno-Karabakh is slightly different. The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia developed in the waning years of the Soviet Union over this ethnically Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan. As the Soviet Union collapsed, the conflict dissolved into a full-scale war, ultimately ending with Armenian control of the region and many of the surrounding territories and towns.<sup>7</sup> Russia has played a key role as an arbiter between the two countries ever since, along with France and the United States, as part of the OSCE's Minsk Group process. However, unlike those two Western powers, Russia is formally aligned with Armenia but supplies arms to both sides in an effort to keep them clearly in its orbit and maintain a role as the primary mediator.

These territorial disputes generally are referred to as frozen conflicts, but the label is a misnomer because they are far from static, as the 2016 fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh and the 2008 Russia-Georgia war clearly indicate. The unresolved nature of all these conflicts, however, provides Russia with the ability to exert influence over warring factions and play a key role in peace negotiations. This forces some breakaway regions to remain highly dependent on Russia for their economic development and security, while the conflicts often have complicated the political, economic, and democratic development of the parent states. Russian meddling inside Ukraine—particularly its support for the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics—now follows this pattern.

Moscow, however, treats each frozen conflict differently. On one hand, for example, it recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, a status recognized only by Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru. On the other hand, it continues to recognize Transnistria as an intrinsic part of Moldova even though it actively supports the breakaway government in Tiraspol and maintains about 1,500 troops in the territory.<sup>8</sup>

Russia does not recognize the self-proclaimed independence of Nagorno-Karabakh nor does it provide it with any direct support, but Moscow maintains a deep bilateral security relationship with Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh’s protector, and has 5,000 troops at a base in Gyumri, Armenia. The combination of Russia’s security ties to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh’s dependence on Armenia provides Moscow with de facto influence over the breakaway region.

In Ukraine, Russia outright annexed Crimea in 2014, putting that territory in a much different category than any of the other breakaway republics. But, elsewhere

in Ukraine, Moscow instigated a separatist movement. Moscow does not formally recognize the independence of the separatist regions in eastern Ukraine, but it provides them with financial, political, and military support.

With the exception of Crimea, all of these territories share the following common features: a set of governing political institutions distinct from the official parent state; limited or no recognition from the outside world; extreme security dependence on an external patron (usually Russia); infiltration of security and intelligence services by Russian organs; their own currencies and economic orientation; and their own self-identification as part of a different social and normative orientation from that of their parent state.<sup>9</sup> Recent academic research and survey work indicates that the residents of most of these breakaway territories favor aligning with Russia and its institutions rather than the official parent state or the West. Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia, however, do not follow this mold in full. About half of the former’s residents favor joining Armenia and 38 percent favor independence.<sup>10</sup> The Abkhaz generally favor independence over formal integration with Russia.

Moreover, as a result of their international isolation, these polities have come to depend heavily on Russia (or Armenia in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh) and, as a result, have been absorbed into the networks’ governing structures and normative frameworks of the Russian Federation.

The frozen conflicts in Moldova, Georgia, and now Ukraine also lead to an inevitable, yet still unacknowledged, trade-off for the West: the objective of promoting territorial integrity or reunification of these divided states is at odds with the formal integration of their parents into Western institutions. Not only would the populations of the breakaway territories resist

attempts to join institutions like NATO or the EU, but Russia itself perceives maintaining the unresolved nature of the conflicts as a check on their parent states from actively joining NATO.

## **INSTRUMENTS OF INFLUENCE: BILATERAL TOOLS AND NEW RUSSIAN-LED REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

Russia projects influence over the post-Soviet states by promoting regional cooperation and integration through new regional organizations under Russian leadership. It also increasingly uses bilateral instruments of soft power to pressure the post-Soviet states to join these organizations and follow its leadership priorities.

### **New Regional Organizations**

The most important of these regional organizations are the Collective Security Treaty Organization—comprising Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—in the security realm, and, in the economic realm, the Eurasian Economic Union, comprising Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Russia's attempts to forge new regional organizations to assert its influence are not new. During the 1990s, Moscow tried to preserve its influence and a common superstructure by promoting the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).<sup>11</sup> In retrospect, however, the CIS became mired in ceremony and convening seemingly endless summits, rather than actively forging new practical cooperative frameworks; it issued hundreds of proclamations, but that seemed more of a defensive attempt to preserve Soviet-era ties rather than establish a new forum for actual problem solving. Accordingly, the limited accomplishments of the CIS in the 1990s led Western commentators to remain skeptical about

subsequent Russian efforts at promoting regional integration or to deem them symbolic or “virtual.”<sup>12</sup>

Since first assuming office in 2000, President Putin redoubled efforts to reinvigorate regional cooperation in both the security and economic realms. Unlike the CIS, which seemed set on trying to preserve past associations and ties, both the CSTO and the EEU seek greater and more substantive integration through the creation of institutionalized rules and decisionmaking processes. These organizations have established supranational bureaucracies that allow Russia to embed personnel within multilateral organizational structures. Tellingly, both organizations are modeled after a Western counterpart: the CSTO emulates NATO, while the EEU mimics some of the institutions of the EU.

The CSTO, established in 2002, is a successor to efforts in the 1990s to forge an intergovernmental military alliance and Russian-led collective security organization from the CIS. Putin sought to re-engage with post-Soviet states on counterterrorism, an effort to which the 2001 NATO-led mission in Afghanistan gave further impetus. The CSTO also provides the legal framework for peacekeeping operations and border management. It is also through this that Russia maintains long-term leases on military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Armenia (it retains facilities in Tajikistan on a bilateral basis) and that it plans to establish a joint air-defense system and aerospace monitoring arrangement with its members.<sup>13</sup> Following the Arab Spring, the organization also launched cybersecurity and information-space initiatives designed to monitor and undermine the Internet activities of regime opponents of its member states.<sup>14</sup>

The CSTO prohibits individual countries from allowing other foreign military actors the right to establish military bases on their territory, effectively giving Russia a veto over basing access across the region. Members

also receive the right to procure military hardware from Russia at discounted prices. The CSTO conducts annual training exercises and facilitates personnel exchanges among member states.

In 2009, the organization developed a Collective Operational Reaction Forces (CORF), loosely modeled on NATO's Response Force, designed to mobilize quickly against transnational threats, and aspiring to maintain a peacekeeping capability. The organization maintains a rotating presidency, though its long-serving secretary general, Nikolai Bordyuzha (who led it from 2003 to 2017), was Russian.

Over the last few years, the CSTO has experienced growing pains and friction over its membership and the scope of its activities. The organization accepted Uzbekistan as a member in 2006, after Tashkent fell out of favor with Washington and evicted U.S. troops from an airbase in the country's south.<sup>15</sup> Tashkent's CSTO membership, however, was short-lived. It exited the organization in 2012 on the grounds that it did not wish to constrain its sovereignty by participating in CSTO arrangements like the CORF.

When it comes to providing security for its members, the CSTO has proven to not be very effective. It refused to respond to the region's most high-profile crisis, the June 2010 ethnic conflict that broke out in southern Kyrgyzstan between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks.<sup>16</sup> The small Central Asian country, already in a state of political upheaval following the ouster of president Kurmanbek Bakiyev, lacked the capacity to halt the violence, and then interim president Roza Otunbayeva requested that Moscow authorize CSTO forces to intervene and stabilize the situation. CSTO and Russian officials refused, blaming their inaction on the organization's lack of mandate to intervene in the domestic affairs of its members, a provision that

has been subsequently changed.<sup>17</sup> Still, the Kyrgyz episode suggests the underlying political complications that surround the CSTO's mandate and inhibit its operational effectiveness.

Founded in May 2014, the EEU is the CSTO's counterpart for economic integration, although its membership is more limited. It is the successor to a number of regional integration initiatives that Russia has promoted over the last twenty years, the latest being the Eurasian Customs Union among Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan that went into effect in 2010.<sup>18</sup> In addition to a common tariff zone, the EEU boasts a more than 1,200-member bureaucracy, a Council of Vice Prime Ministers, and a court (located in Minsk) designed to settle member state disputes.<sup>19</sup>

Moscow has made expanding the EEU's membership and external relations a priority. It has pushed for the EEU to negotiate agreements with countries outside the region, like Vietnam, while insisting that the union, as a whole, should negotiate with China over coordinating its Belt and Road Initiative projects in Eurasia. Russia also has used incentives and threats in bilateral relations—especially in negotiations with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan—to secure these countries' accession. Moscow now regards the EEU as the primary organization for promoting the economic reintegration of the Eurasian space and the institutionalization of Russian-led regulatory standards. Certainly, without Ukraine's membership, the EEU is smaller and less economically diversified than originally envisioned, but the organization is more developed and consequential than many Western critics assume.

Perhaps the organization's greatest shortcoming is that it lacks credibility in enforcing its own rules and directives. It is precisely the fact that Russia, through a system of weighted representation, controls the decisionmaking

bodies of the organization that affirms its de facto control of the body and keeps the EEU's various organs subject to Russian foreign policy goals. Moreover, in an attempt to finalize the body's founding agreement in 2014, Russian negotiators ceded many exemptions to its institutional rules to satisfy its members. Thus, Belarus was permitted to re-export Russian energy, Armenia was granted exemptions on hundreds of goods, and Kazakhstan steadfastly refused to sign onto the political elements of the originally proposed Eurasian Union.<sup>20</sup> Its decisionmaking credibility was also strained when Russia did not consult with other EEU members before it imposed countersanctions on European agricultural goods in 2014. And while the organization has made progress in creating a single common market and adopting a common external tariff, it continues to struggle with reducing nontariff and informal barriers,<sup>21</sup> leaving in doubt its more ambitious goals, such as overseeing a unified energy market and even a common currency.

To date, neither the United States nor the European Union formally maintains ties with either the CSTO or the EEU. Moscow views this refusal as a slight to its own status and further evidence of the West's inability to consider Russia an equal. The Russian leadership took particular exception when U.S. planners reportedly blocked a 2009 NATO effort to engage with the CSTO.<sup>22</sup> Some in the West argue that NATO or the EU should not engage with these Russian-led organizations because some of their members were coerced into joining by Moscow.<sup>23</sup> But this reasoning is highly selective given that both the United States and Europe maintain regular contacts and working dialogues with a number of regional security and economic organizations, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, that are dominated by the interests and agendas of their larger, relatively more powerful members.

The refusal of the West to engage, even symbolically, with these organizations is shortsighted. While Western engagement in the form of NATO-CSTO or EU-EEU contacts certainly would provide the international recognition that Moscow craves, it also would place the spotlight firmly on the internal tensions these Russian-dominated organizations experience, specifically their asymmetrical bureaucratic development, and a growing lack of credibility that these bodies face in the region. In substance, the West would lose little from engagement.

Finally, briefly consider the evolution of one other regional body—the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, established in 2001. The SCO brings together China, Russia, four of the Central Asian states, and most recently India and Pakistan. The organization seems to serve different purposes for Moscow and Beijing. Russia welcomes the organization issuing public statements that criticize U.S. global hegemony and the imposition of U.S. values and norms in international relations. The SCO has released statements critical of U.S. missile defense, attempts at regime change, and the campaign in Syria (prior to Russian intervention). However, Moscow is far less keen on institutionalizing Chinese economic primacy in Central Asia, even as China tries to expand the organization's economic functions. For example, Russia has blocked Chinese initiatives such as forming an SCO Anti-Crisis Fund or Regional Development Bank.<sup>24</sup> Russia also has pushed for the organization's expansion, likely in an attempt to diminish Beijing's power in it. While Russia welcomes the anti-Western rhetoric and initiatives coming out of the SCO, it privately has opposed empowering any institution that sets up institutional or regulatory frameworks that might encroach on the EEU's jurisdiction.

## Russian Bilateral Levers: Energy, Debt, and Migrants

Russia complements its use of regional organizations by wielding additional soft power levers over the post-Soviet states. Three main instruments of influence are energy relations, debt agreements, and the status of migrants. These issues are central to many of Moscow's bilateral foreign relations, but they also act as important bargaining chips in Moscow's attempts to pressure the post-Soviet states to follow its leadership within bodies like the EEU and CSTO.

Perhaps Russia's most important tool of statecraft is its control over energy pricing, infrastructure construction, and pipelines for transit. During the 2000s, Moscow developed a number of intricate bilateral arrangements with the post-Soviet states to provide subsidized oil and gas while acquiring energy infrastructure, such as pipelines and power grids. Scholars argue that Moscow has routinely used these energy ties and dependencies to promote broader objectives in its foreign relations, including wielding its control over the flow of gas to dependent countries like Belarus and Ukraine to secure foreign policy fealty.<sup>25</sup> For example, in the Kharkiv Pact of 2010, Ukraine agreed to extend the lease of basing rights in Crimea for the Russian Black Sea Fleet for twenty-five years in exchange for a 25 percent discount on Russian natural gas imports—a deal valued then at \$40 billion.<sup>26</sup> The Kremlin, however, effectively tore up the agreement following its annexation of Crimea in 2014, insisting that Kyiv pay the nondiscounted price.<sup>27</sup> Moscow has also used the promise of subsidized energy to influence Armenia (where it controls all gas imports) and Kyrgyzstan to formally join the Eurasian Economic Union, while it dropped its objections to Belarus engaging in the re-export of subsidized Russian oil as an EEU member.<sup>28</sup> But according to other scholars, this very same energy infrastructure interdependence has promoted Moscow's sense of political vulnerability to the demands from transit countries like Ukraine, prompting

it and its European energy partners to seek deals like Nord Stream to directly send gas to Germany and West European customers.<sup>29</sup>

A second instrument, sometimes closely related to energy relations, is the bilateral debt it holds and the related debt financing. In the run-up to the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, Moscow offered the Yanukovich regime \$15 billion worth of short-term financing in exchange for Ukraine dropping its negotiations on an EU Association Agreement. Similarly, the restricting or partial forgiveness of bilateral debt has been a key part of Moscow's ability to conclude security and basing rights agreements with Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

However, such powerful bilateral levers do not always guarantee loyalty. For example, despite extending an emergency loan to Belarus in 2009, Minsk did not recognize the independence of Abkhazia or South Ossetia as Moscow had reportedly instructed.<sup>30</sup> And in early 2009, Moscow extended a \$2 billion package of emergency assistance and hydropower investment to then Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiyev in an apparent effort to have him shutter U.S. operations at the Manas air base. However, after receiving a \$300 million payment from Moscow, Bakiyev concluded a new agreement with Washington that increased the rent and renamed the facility.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, Moscow has frequently used the often uncertain legal and work status of millions of migrant laborers, mainly from Central Asia, in its bilateral dealings and as a means to pressure Central Asian governments to support Moscow's regional initiatives. Labor migration is a relatively recent phenomenon, having taken off in the 2000s, and has been driven by stagnant Central Asian economies and growing labor demand in Russia. According to the Russian Federal Migration Service, over 4.5 million citizens from post-Soviet states lived

in Russia as of December 2014.<sup>32</sup> Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which both rely heavily on remittances from migrant laborers in Russia, have been particularly vulnerable to Moscow's threats of cracking down on migrants or even expelling them. Most recently, reports have suggested that Moscow is using the status of migrants to pressure Tajikistan to commit to joining the EEU, as it did with Kyrgyzstan.<sup>33</sup>

### WHOSE SPACE, WHOSE NORMS?

Finally, over the last ten years Russia has led the effort to block the regional influence of Western actors and liberal norms, and it has orchestrated a growing backlash against the dissemination of Western values—all in an effort to defend the concept of state sovereignty.

Perhaps the biggest target is the West's promotion of democracy and human rights in Russia and the rest of the post-Soviet space. Following the color revolutions of the mid-2000s that swept leaders from power in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004–2005), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) and replaced them with actors more eager to align with the West, calls for democratization became inexorably tied with perceptions that the West was promoting regime change.<sup>34</sup> After the anti-regime protests in Russia in 2012, Western calls for greater political liberalization went from being regarded as political nuisances to a matter of national security. Some of Russia's restrictions include the foreign agents law and the law on undesirable organizations, which effectively banned certain Western organizations from funding civil society organizations and projects in Russia.<sup>35</sup> Copycat legislation has been introduced across Eurasia with various levels of success, while the activities of international election monitors, pollsters, and human rights groups have also been targeted and stigmatized as forms of external destabilization.<sup>36</sup> These Western monitoring groups often have been replaced

by Eurasian regional counterparts, such as election monitoring missions from the CSTO and SCO.

Further, Moscow now collaborates with other states' intelligence and security services in actively monitoring and forcibly returning political exiles and dissidents to their home countries.<sup>37</sup> Whereas Russia used to provide a safe space for Central Asian dissidents and political opponents, since the mid-2000s Russian security services have regularly collaborated with their Central Asian counterparts to detain and return wanted opposition figures.<sup>38</sup>

Moscow has also introduced its own mechanisms of soft power throughout the region. One of the most debated is Moscow's state media outlet Sputnik, which broadcasts television, radio, and online news to various markets worldwide. Similarly, the satellite television station RT has been described by the Interpreter as a "weapon" for the Kremlin and its geopolitical agenda.<sup>39</sup> Russian media and news regularly feature stories that emphasize Western hypocrisy and double standards and highlight the political and social problems confronted by the United States and Europe, while Russian entertainment programs remain genuinely popular in the region.

Moreover, in recent years, the post-Soviet states have embraced a number of ideas that explicitly oppose the universality of liberal values.<sup>40</sup> These include ideas like "civilizational diversity" (favored by China and embodied in the SCO's charter), the primacy of sovereignty and security in the fight against extremism, and the return to "traditional values" in response to the moral crisis of the West. Criticism of the moral decline of the West and its obsession with individual rights is often contrasted with an emphasis on conservative values, such as the importance of religion, the patriarchal family, community, and tradition. In practical terms,



the traditional values campaign has generated a wave of anti-LGBT legislation in Russia and across the region, including in some states that had been moving closer to the West.<sup>41</sup>

Glib Western comments, like Russia is a “declining power,” further embolden Moscow’s efforts to demarcate its sphere of normative influence around its near abroad. Europe’s inadequate response to the refugee crisis, Brexit, the rise of populist regimes in Hungary and Poland, and the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the chaotic nature of his administration all suggest to Russian leadership and foreign policy opinion makers that it is now the West, not Russia, that is confronting a crisis of confidence in its values and identity. Russia views the geopolitical fight against Western encroachment as inexorably tied to this new battle against the ideas, practices, and actors that have sustained the liberal order in Europe and around the world. Russia’s support for both extreme right and left wing parties in Western Europe, as well as its interference in the 2016 U.S. election, are as much about wanting to discredit the liberal principles and credibility of Western leadership and the transatlantic relationship, as they are about supporting political parties and individuals who are more conciliatory toward Russia and its positions.

But despite Russia’s efforts to repel Western actors and influences, not all of the post-Soviet states have fully embraced Moscow’s agenda. Indeed, earlier this year the usually reliably pro-Russian government in Kyrgyzstan was actually defeated in a parliamentary hearing on a foreign agents bill, precisely because groups argued that it would cut off critical external support to the struggling country. Even authoritarian regimes, like Kazakhstan or Azerbaijan, that fully support the Kremlin’s backlash against the West’s values agenda nevertheless remain concerned about their status and image in the West, and

are eager to improve and maintain good ties with the West. All Eurasian countries still actively seek Western engagement for both political and economic reasons, and to allow some autonomy for maneuvering away from Moscow’s and, increasingly, Beijing’s agendas.

### **NAVIGATING THE POST-SOVIET SPACE: AN EVOLVING APPROACH FOR A NEW ADMINISTRATION**

Given Russia’s varying instruments of influence and Moscow’s and Washington’s competing visions over the future of the post-Soviet states, how should the United States approach the region while also constructively engaging with Moscow?

A new approach is likely needed—one that reduces East-West tensions in the region, respects the sovereignty of the post-Soviet states, and provides them with more room to maneuver between Russia and the West. This approach would include acknowledging Russia’s interests in its immediate neighborhood without ceding to Moscow any exclusive Russian sphere of influence in the region. For the United States, the NATO alliance could signal that it is willing to encourage its allies and partners to establish formal links with Russian-led regional counterparts, like the EEU and CSTO, as part of a broader process of multilateral engagement. Such a commitment would not represent fundamentally new European security architecture, as Russia would like, but would expand the contacts among Russian-led and Western institutions and ease the pressure on some of the Soviet states to make a definitive choice between pro-Western and pro-Russian alignment. Giving them the option of participating in different regional projects could potentially allow for more Western engagement on a non-exclusive basis.

Further, both Washington and Moscow should commit to close consultations in the event of any sudden change in the political status quo in a post-Soviet state, due to either an election result, the death of a head of state, or a sudden regime collapse. Given rising socioeconomic tensions in the region, growing populism, and aging autocrats, regime destabilization can happen suddenly. There is plenty of academic research that suggests sudden regime changes or the anticipation of regime transitions often generate important geopolitical aftershocks and exacerbate tensions between competing regional or global powers.<sup>42</sup> Creating this consultation mechanism would not give either side a say in the fate of a third-country government, nor should it create a platform to jointly decide the future of a Eurasian state, but rather it should allow both sides to openly communicate their intentions. This could avoid a repeat of the 2014 Ukraine political crisis, when competing narratives about events led to deep misunderstandings, and when events in Kyiv occurred at such a fast pace they were impossible to manage.

Ultimately, conceiving of the post-Soviet states as an arena where overlapping influences, norms, and regional organizations can coexist without forcing host countries to choose between West and East would help alleviate the geopoliticization of nearly every foreign policy interaction of the post-Soviet states. Ultimately, the West's institutions and ideas are strong. Even at a time of deep uncertainty in Washington and Brussels, Eastern European and Eurasian states still strive to join—or at least to develop a closer relationship—with Western political, economic, and security institutions. Given the attraction that the West still holds, Washington and Brussels should be confident of their ability to coexist with Russia in Eurasia, and confident of other sources of norms and influence in the post-Communist states and beyond. Whether Russia has the same confidence is not quite clear.

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## TASK FORCE ON U.S. POLICY TOWARD RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND EURASIA

*The task force will assess the strengths and weaknesses of U.S. and Western policy toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia since the end of the Cold War and offer a set of guiding principles for a durable U.S. policy framework. The task force is a joint effort with the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and is supported, in part, by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.*



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