



PROJECTING

**RUSSIA SEEKS TO
RECAPTURE ITS
IMPERIAL PAST
BY EXPLOITING
FORMER SOVIET
COUNTRIES**

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Discussing Russia's attempts to influence former Soviet countries requires a thorough understanding of just how important the "near abroad" is to the self-understanding and legitimization of the ruling Russian elites. Those elites define Russia's role as a global power through its primacy as a regional power. As far as they are concerned, Russia can't be a global player without being the dominant power in the post-Soviet region. That mindset — along with Russia's nuclear arsenal and its seat on the United Nations Security Council — represents a potent Soviet legacy that defines Russia's self-perception today.

Russia sees its historical role in the region as justification for trying to influence the politics, economies and culture of former Soviet countries. Russian leadership regularly questions the sovereignty and borders of neighboring post-Soviet states, as Russian President Vladimir Putin did in August 2014 when he declared, "The Kazakhs never had any statehood." Or as James Sherr points out in his 2013 book, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad*, integration with the European Union is a "choice," while integration with Russia is "historically conditioned." Dominance over its neighbors is, to the self-understanding of the Russian elites, crucial to the survival of the Russian state. This mentality is rooted in Russia's history as an empire. Therefore, the Russian elites are willing to pay a much higher price to dominate the near abroad and prevent external players from questioning Russia's role than the EU and NATO are willing pay for rapprochement, support or the integration of these states.

This understanding also influences how Russian elites perceive change in the neighborhood. When political, social and economic change occurs through fundamental reforms — for instance, in the context of free trade and association agreements with the EU — it undermines Russia's political, social and economic hegemony and illustrates how political and economic reforms can bring post-Soviet countries closer to EU standards. The existence of an alternative to the Putin model is unacceptable to the current regime; Russia wants to set the rules and norms. Moscow tries to influence the region through informal relations and corruption. It prefers weak institutions and agreements based on personal ties. One reason Russia responded so aggressively to the

Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine was to prevent the emergence of an alternative development model in the context of rapprochement with the EU. At the same time, Russia's military intervention in Ukraine represents a failed "carrot-and-stick" policy that revealed the limits of its soft power.

INSTRUMENTS OF INFLUENCE

Russia uses soft and hard power to influence its post-Soviet neighbors, though in reality the soft power is more like soft coercion. According to Sherr, soft coercion is "influence that is indirectly coercive, resting on covert methods (penetration, bribery, blackmail), and new forms of power, such as energy supply, which are difficult to define as hard or soft." On the soft side, there are carrots and sticks linked to economic and energy relations and a set of multi-lateral institutions dominated by Russia, as well as (mimicking Western policy) media and GONGOS (governmentally organized nongovernmental organizations) that try to influence the internal debate in these countries. On the hard side is a military buildup and the use of post-Soviet conflicts — or the creation of new conflicts such as the one in eastern Ukraine — to undermine sovereignty.

CARROTS AND STICKS

Traditionally, post-Soviet Russia has influenced its neighbors by controlling the supply of subsidized oil and gas. Price negotiations are an opportunity to remind these states of their dependence and limited sovereignty. At the same time, supplying oil and gas and creating intermediaries has presented opportunities for corrupt activities by Russian elites and the elites of neighboring states. Corruption and the possibility of self-enrichment are important tools of Russian influence and are a common part of the post-Soviet legacy. It creates loyalty inside Russia and in the neighborhood, and protects Russian interests in post-Soviet countries.

Russia also uses economic sanctions (such as restricting imports or increasing gas prices) to improve its bargaining position or prevent neighboring states from leaving its sphere of influence. The economic sanctions imposed against Ukraine the summer before the EU's November 2013 Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, are typical of how Russia applies pressure on post-Soviet elites at strategically important moments. For the first time, Russian leadership understood that free trade and association agreements between post-Soviet



A Russian warship in Sevastopol, Crimea, participates in the 2016 Defender of the Fatherland Day holiday, which celebrates the Red Army. When “soft power” efforts fail, Russia reverts to military might to influence former Soviet countries. REUTERS

states and the EU could undermine Russia’s influence on its neighbors. In addition to the sanctions, or the stick, the Russians offered a carrot: a \$15 billion credit to then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to spare Ukraine from bankruptcy.

But Russian leadership always underestimates the role of societies in politics. The Russian elite’s paranoia that the West creates the civil resistance movements described as “color revolutions” in post-Soviet countries is based on a belief that societies are passive and only motivated by leadership or external players. The Kremlin has been slow to recognize that societies are becoming more active in a globalized world — with social media a powerful tool of self-organization and communication. The failure to adapt to this changing dynamic is the source of Putin’s repeated miscalculation of the social and political dynamics in Ukraine. Despite all the obstacles in the reform process, Ukraine has a vibrant civil society.

MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS

Multilateral institutions are an important way for Russia to connect with its post-Soviet neighbors. While the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) signaled the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union, it never succeeded as an instrument of integration. Institutions like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the security arm of the CIS, and the Eurasian Customs Union and

later the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) have been more successful at integration. The CSTO has become an important security tool in the post-Soviet region by allowing the Russian government to deploy troops in neighboring states or intervene in conflicts in a multilateral framework. There has been an agreement among CSTO members that rapid reaction forces can also be deployed in post-Soviet countries if there are domestic riots or color revolutions. The threat of color revolutions ties post-Soviet countries to Russia.

At the same time, membership in the CSTO gives access to Russian weapons at a discount, which is especially attractive to poor states like Armenia or Tajikistan. Being the dominant security actor and provider for post-Soviet countries is an important tool for Russia in terms of the dependency and vulnerability of its neighbors, especially in difficult economic times. Just before Armenia was to sign an association agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU, Russia questioned its continued military support of Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. As a result, Armenia not only rejected the nearly finalized association agreement, but also joined the Russia-led EEU. Additionally, Russia is building alternatives to Western organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Initiative, which helps to balance Russian-Chinese interests in Central Asia while strengthening ties with Peking on security and economic issues.

Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus established the EEU in 2015. For the first time, Russian leadership tried to copy the EU and push economic integration among post-Soviet countries. It’s a lesson Russia learned from the EU’s successful economic integration efforts and a recognition that other post-Soviet integration projects have failed. The first EEU concept, presented by Putin in 2010, called for participating states to negotiate, under Russian leadership, a common economic space with the EU. However, since 2013-2014, amid increasing conflict with the West, the goal has been to prevent EEU states from integrating with the EU or at least to limit the access of other external players through increased trade barriers. Here, Russia again used a policy of carrots and sticks. While Armenia was threatened with a withdrawal of military support, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko negotiated a discount on oil and gas prices along with much-needed financial credit from Russia for joining. But those efforts can’t overcome the main challenges to real integration in the EEU, which include Russia’s dominance, the limited innovation potential of member states and the logic that authoritarian states will never give up sovereignty.

MANIPULATING THE PUBLIC

There is a growing significance placed on the direct and indirect manipulation of post-Soviet countries through Russian media, propaganda, disinformation and the Orthodox Church. Russian media has become a powerful tool, not only to influence public opinion inside Russia, but also in neighboring countries (and increasingly in the West). Because the Russian language remains the lingua franca in the region, a majority of Russian speakers, even in Baltic states, still watch Russian TV. Russian media has a huge influence on post-Soviet societies because it's often much better in terms of quality and entertainment than local TV. At the same time, it distributes an anti-United States, anti-NATO and anti-Western narrative. It often shows a world in crisis and the Russian president as the main stabilizing force for global peace. Russia as the island of stability and peace in a chaotic world is an important narrative. Russian TV and media have become powerful tools to reach out to the *Russkiy mir* — the Russian world — and create an alternative narrative to that of the Euro-Atlantic world. In failing to influence public discussion on the Beslan school terror attack, the Georgian conflict and the Sochi Olympic Games, Russian leadership has learned that it is crucial to dominate the information sphere at home and abroad. The Russian state has invested significantly in foreign media, but also in cyber attacks and in spreading negative and false narratives. Discrediting politicians, or the EU and U.S. policy media, has become a powerful tool for influencing societies in post-Soviet countries.

Furthermore, GONGOS and state-funded organizations, such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation and the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, are important instruments for reaching out to post-Soviet societies. Russia uses these institutions to influence public opinion and to create and distribute an alternative narrative to Western audiences, co-opted elites and stakeholders. The Russian federal agency Rossotrudnichestvo was established to increase ties with post-Soviet elites and societies and to coordinate policies and instruments to influence them.

The Russian Orthodox Church is another important element of influence. It plays a role as intermediary and influencer of societies in Russia and its neighborhood. It not only propagates the official Russian view of the world, but also anti-Western sentiments linked with conservative values and the independence of a traditional culture. The value discourse — which is linked to traditional views on family, anti-LGBT sentiments, anti-pluralism, anti-tolerance and to popular nostalgia — is well-received in the more conservative post-Soviet societies.

THE EU'S EASTERN PARTNERSHIP, CREATED TO STRENGTHEN RELATIONS WITH SIX OF ITS EASTERN NEIGHBORS (ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN, BELARUS, GEORGIA, MOLDOVA, UKRAINE), SHOULD OFFER:

- A differentiation between those wanting political association, economic integration and maybe membership, and those only interested in cooperation.
- A focus on urgent needs. While European Union association and free trade agreements set long-term reform goals, short- and mid-term prioritization efforts are also needed.
- Improved security. Insecurity is a major challenge to sustaining reforms. The EU and NATO need to invest more in institution building in the security sphere, including border management training and addressing separatist conflicts. Eastern Partnership policy for transformation must be tied to other instruments of EU diplomacy and security policy.
- Strong institutions. Weak institutions represent a big challenge for Eastern European countries, especially when key institutions and authorities are controlled by vested interests that hold veto power over reforms. Institutions require external guarantees to ensure and enable their independence. New institutions are needed that allow the EU and its member states to participate directly with national and regional authorities in implementing reforms.
- Visa liberalization. Mobility is the single most important initiative the EU could take to signal to ordinary Eastern Europeans that deeper association with the EU can improve their lives.
- Support for participation in overlapping institutional frameworks for various policy areas, such as Moldova's and Ukraine's participation in the energy community or the Energy Union. The EU should allow associated partners to participate in mechanisms such as customs, border security and transportation policy, or in civil components of European security and defense policy.



Activists for nationalist groups mark Ukrainian Military Volunteer Day in Kyiv in March 2017 by blockading rail shipments that support Russia-backed separatists. REUTERS

HISTORY AND LEGITIMACY

History is increasingly becoming a key source of legitimacy for the Putin regime. The concept of *Russkiy mir* is a good example. Under that concept, all people who speak, feel and think Russian are Russians and have a right to be protected by the Russian state. That is a very fuzzy concept that not only includes ethnic Russians, but all people influenced by Russian culture and language, a huge number in the post-Soviet states where Russian culture and language were imposed by the Russian/Soviet empire. This Kremlin definition of the “responsibility to protect” is an important legitimization for intervening in neighboring states and for questioning their borders and sovereignty. Identity concepts such as *Novaya Rossiya* (New Russia), as some call southeast Ukraine, are based on a historic concept and are used to legitimize military aggression. At the same time, it justifies the concept of Ukraine as an integral part of a sphere of influence

dominated by Russia. Domestically, *Russkiy mir* stands for external expansion and the ideology of victory, which helps to legitimize the regime in times of economic stagnation. Again, it is part of the great power projection.

HARD SECURITY

Lacking soft power and, increasingly, the economic resources needed to buy loyalty, Russia is increasingly relying on open and covert military attacks to prevent its neighbors from leaving its sphere of influence. The Russia-Georgia war in 2008 is an example. Russia used a military confrontation to de facto annex Georgia’s separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. From a Russian leadership perspective, this has prevented Georgia from joining NATO. In the Ukrainian conflict, Russia went even further and openly annexed Crimea through a referendum that did not meet any international standards, and then started a war in parts

of eastern Ukraine to prevent the country from further EU integration. This was at first a policy of weakness, necessitated by Russia's failure to bind Ukraine to Russia through a strategy of carrots and sticks. Only the covert military operation assured Russia's influence over Crimea (and Russian naval bases in Sevastopol) and over the post-Maidan Ukrainian government. But because of the muted reactions (no serious sanctions resulted from the war against Georgia) by the EU and the U.S., Russian leadership learned that covert military action and destabilization of a post-Soviet neighbor have only limited costs. These actions in Crimea had been prepared since the so-called Orange Revolution in 2004 and should not have surprised the West, nor Ukrainian leadership.

Managed destabilization — or “Bosnization” as some Russian experts call it in the context of the Ukrainian conflict — has become an instrument of Russian politics toward its neighbors. To create areas of lawlessness, corruption and despotism is an instrument of influence that prevents these countries from further integration with the EU or NATO. It also means that Russian leadership prefers unstable zones to a stable neighborhood. Supporting bad governance, in competition with EU-promoted good governance, has become part of Russia's policy in the neighborhood and is based on the limits of Russian resources. Destruction and destabilization are always cheaper and easier than stabilization and reconstruction.

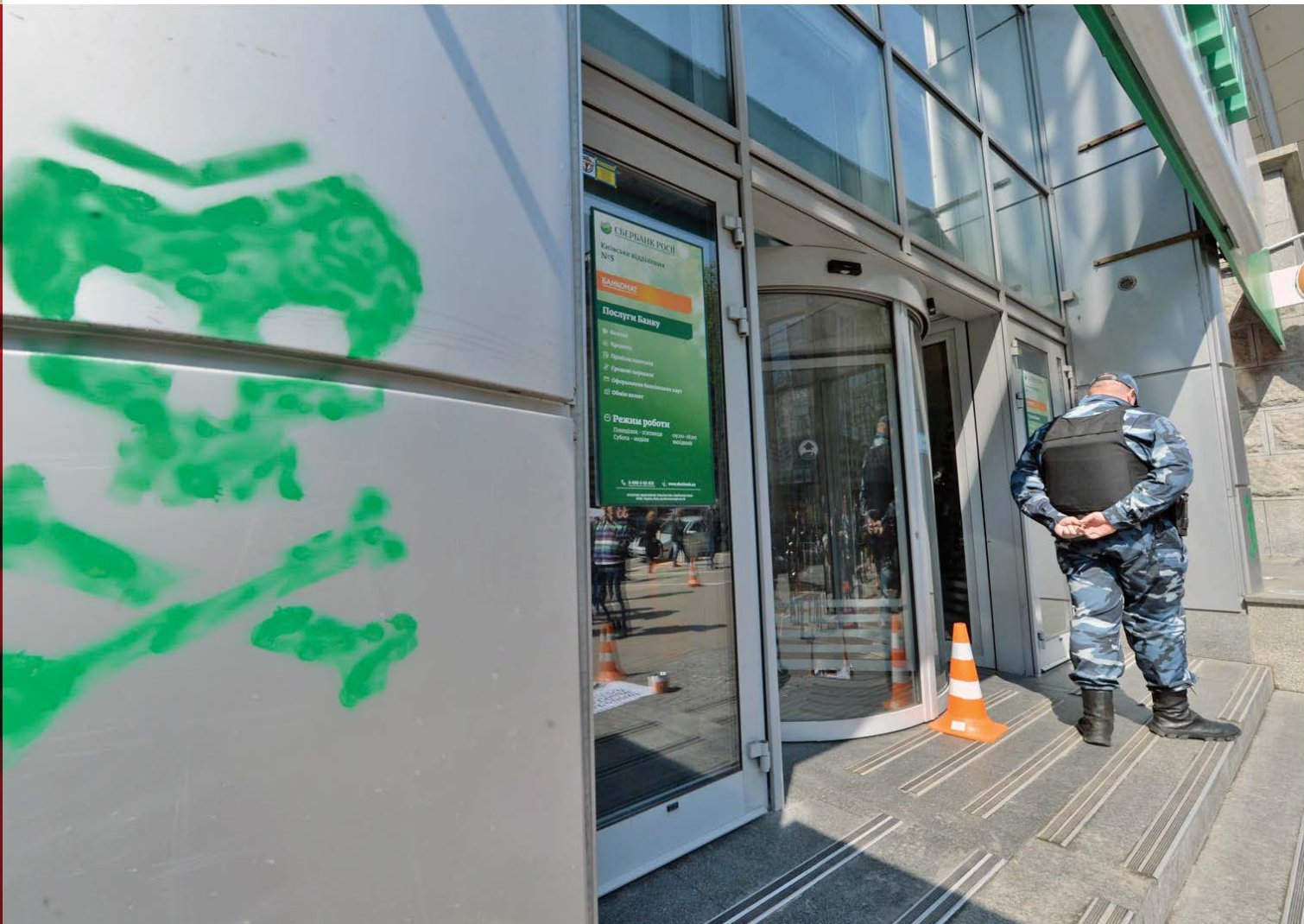
Post-Soviet conflict zones often become areas of Russian influence outside of international law. These are more or less functioning entities, or pseudo-states, with administration and pseudo-elections, but without the rule of law and with despotism and limited or no access to the outside world. Sovereignty and borders are undermined, preventing integration with other institutions. Today, five of six Eastern Partnership countries have a protracted or separatist conflict in which Russia plays a role either as a conflict party or as the main negotiator. Moscow is either financing or subsidizing separatists, as in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Transnistria in Moldova, and Crimea and the Donbass in Ukraine. Simultaneously, in most of these conflicts, the Russian military is present in the separatist regions. Moscow is supplying the conflict parties with weapons, as in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, and is the main ally of one of the conflict parties. These conflict zones are always a threat to their mother states because they give Russia the opportunity to intervene or challenge their security. The threat of destabilization and spillover of military confrontation and despotism is a constant threat. This, consequently, allows some post-Soviet regimes to legitimize autocratic policies.

WHY THE EU SHOULD DEVELOP STRATEGIC TRANS-ATLANTIC COMPLEMENTS:

- While only the EU can offer a conclusive framework anchoring Eastern European states, the U.S. can play complementary and supporting roles in the cooperation and security sectors.
- NATO can deepen its ties via practical means that can advance reforms while affirming open-door principles.
- EU reform and transformation offers can only be successful if linked to security guarantees, which at this time only NATO can provide. There is a need for more EU/U.S. engagement in the post-Soviet conflict zones.

WHY THE EU SHOULD ENGAGE ROBUSTLY WITHIN THE OSCE:

- In times of military tension, which increases the possibilities for accidents and misperceptions, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) can provide a common platform for mediation, dialogue, trust building and conflict prevention.
- OSCE monitoring missions, such as those in Ukraine, bring transparency to conflicts and provide neutral information.
- Russia will perceive the OSCE as more relevant if Western countries invest more in the organization, take more ownership and raise their profiles. It is important to use this platform to address crucial security questions.
- Russia's control of the energy sector gives it influence over many European states and opens the door to corruption. Diversification, competition and interconnectors make EU members and their Eastern neighbors much less vulnerable to disruption and corruption.



A police officer stands guard near “green men” graffiti left by protesters on the side of a Russian Sberbank branch in Kyiv. The green men were camouflaged, pro-Russian gunmen who seized government buildings, banks and police stations in Crimea in 2014. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

DOMESTIC VULNERABILITIES

This policy of influence also succeeds because of domestic vulnerabilities in post-Soviet countries that are often weak and corrupt. Elites put their vested interests ahead of the country’s future. Lack of reforms or rule of law, dominance of informal over formal institutions, and the disinterest of the elites in sustainable reforms make it easier for Russia to influence its neighbors. When there is no breakthrough in the reform process, vested interests are dominant and only small parts of society benefit from official policies. There can be no fundamental change. One strategy of post-Soviet states is to play both sides — the EU and Russia — to get as much personal benefit for the least possible reform. Lukashenko is a master at this game, as he is completely dependent on Russian credits and subsidies but at the same time periodically plays the card of a possible rapprochement with the EU.

There is a huge demand for security in post-Soviet societies. Insecurity, or uncertainty, is an important tool used by Russian leadership and post-Soviet elites. It’s no surprise that security institutions in these states are often weak, underfunded and corrupt. They lack modern equipment, have limited deployment ability and are often linked with, or infiltrated by, Russian intelligence and security services. When Russia occupied Crimea with “little green men” — the name given to soldiers in unmarked uniforms — the Ukrainian Army did not react because it was ill-equipped and unable to respond to Russia’s military dominance. In contrast, Russia began a fundamental reform of its army after the 2008 war with Georgia, upgrading its mobility, speed, communication and equipment. Russian leadership is now able and willing to respond militarily to any challenge in its neighborhood. The use of military power or show of force has become an important part of its policy in its near abroad.

Many elites in post-Soviet countries have no interest in good governance. They prefer informal rules and encourage corruption because it protects their power and rent-seeking opportunities. As long as civil society is weak, the internal pressure for change will be insufficient, and it will be difficult for outside reform forces to effect change. Elites in these countries have little interest in EU membership because the process of rapprochement and integration would threaten their authority. This is the case with the oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc in Moldova, who owns Moldovan policy and has no interest in change. He and his political proxies constantly play the political game between Russia and the EU/West. Even in Ukraine, where the most developed civil society in a post-Soviet country outside of the Baltics is putting the ruling elites under pressure to reform the system, the resistance of oligarchs, such as Rinat Akhmetov and Ihor Kolomoysky, who benefit from the country's current state, remains a powerful force. Oligarch pressure has nearly stopped the reform process and weakened anti-corruption institutions.

This post-Soviet legacy makes all countries vulnerable to outside influences. It opens the door for Russian machinations to influence decision-making. The Putin regime has no interest in changing this legacy because it is a powerful tool of influence and prevents countries from adapting European norms and standards.

HOW TO RESPOND

It is crucial that the West does its homework. If the EU and U.S. fail to live up to their own standards and norms, they will fail to inspire reforms and development in Eastern Europe. If the EU and U.S. fail as role models, it will be easier for Russia to undermine the credibility of the West. If the Western democracies are not able to modernize and adapt to the changing global situation, it will be easier for autocracies to protect their model of governance. Russia's current political, economic and social model is unsustainable, but it will last longer if the West lacks responsible leadership and ownership of international crises. Russian leaders are willing to pay a high price to protect Russia's claimed sphere of influence, while European leaders appear unwilling to invest sufficiently in the stabilization of its eastern neighborhood. This short-term thinking can make the Russian president appear to be a powerful leader.

Resilience comes from within, through rule of law, good governance, a competitive media, checks and balances, transparency and functioning institutions. This is a generational task for all

Eastern European countries. The West can help by serving as a role model and lending its expertise. The prospect of EU membership will not be a game changer for most post-Soviet countries. Many of their elites don't see a benefit in joining the EU, and many societies lack the understanding and the power to push for integration. At the same time, the EU alienates many of the countries that want to modernize by failing to offer a path to EU accession. Every European country that wants to join the EU should have the opportunity. But there should be a realistic assessment and communication on what it really means, how long it takes and how much it costs. There is a need for a selective integration model that is acceptable to EU members and interested countries. A multi-speed EU would offer new opportunities for partial integration for countries such as Ukraine and Georgia.

The EU should be more active in helping its Eastern neighbors with reforms. It should, when demanded by civil society and in places like Ukraine, offer expertise on reform processes and funding. There is a need to empower civil society and reform-oriented elites.

In most post-Soviet countries, internal weakness is as much a threat to peace, stability and development as external meddling. Russia is an aggressor and spoiler; these countries and their Western partners must prevent Russia from positioning itself as an alternative to real reforms. Sustained economic and democratic development throughout the region is a function of these states' capacity to provide security to their citizens and improve functioning institutions grounded in the rule of law.

Closer association with the West begins at home. Eastern European states should pursue democratic reforms not as a favor to the West, but as a benefit to themselves. Their societies and elites must decide if they truly want to reform and Europeanize by fighting corruption and building the rule of law and competitive economies, or if they prefer stagnation and weak governance. If these states fulfill certain conditions, the EU needs to ease visa restrictions to allow for freer movement between countries.

At this time, the EU's most important tools are association agreements and DCFTAs, which in effect bring the participating states closer to EU member standards. But it is important the EU not undermine its credibility by lowering standards in a rush to construct success stories. Less ambition, more adaptation to the realities of the participating states, and a tougher conditionality are important prerequisites for a successful change in these countries. □