



# Trade-offs and inconsistencies of the Russian foreign policy: The case of Eurasia

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## Abstract

In this article, we explore the inherent trade-offs and inconsistencies of Russia's policies toward the post-Soviet space. We argue that attempts to rebuild an image of Russia as a “great power” have actually led to a reduction of Russian influence in the post-Soviet region. The more Russia acted as a “Great Power,” the less credible was its promise to respect the national sovereignty of the former Soviet republics. In 2011, Vladimir Putin declared that during his next term as president, his goal would be to establish a powerful supra-national Eurasian Union capable of becoming one of the poles in a multipolar world. However, Russia's attempt to force Ukraine to join the Eurasian Union provoked the 2014 crisis. The Ukrainian crisis has de-facto completed the separation of Ukraine and Russia and made successful post-Soviet re-integration around Russia improbable.

## Keywords

Credible commitment, Eurasia, great power, post-Soviet integration, Russian foreign policy

In 2004, Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman published an optimistic article in *Foreign Affairs* summarizing the results of the post-Soviet reforms. Arguing that Russia became “a normal middle income country,” the authors acknowledged that Russia's economic and political systems remained far from perfect but those deficiencies, on their opinion, were typical for countries at a similar level of economic and political development. The article concluded

That Russia is only normal may be a disappointment to those who had hoped for more. . . . But for a country that was an “evil empire” as little as 15 years ago-threatening people at home and abroad—it is a remarkable and admirable achievement. (Treisman & Shleifer, 2004, p. 38)

Perhaps, the argument about the Russian economic system being “normal” for a middle income country is still a valid one, but by most accounts Russian foreign policies are anything but “normal” in the 21st century. In particular, since 2008, it is increasingly difficult to predict and rationalize the moves of the Russian government in the post-Soviet neighborhood. A number of foreign policy moves seems to be sub-optimal if evaluated assuming the existence of a specific long strategy toward the post-Soviet space—for

example, possible objectives could be achieved by other means with less cost and with a greater chance for long-term success.

Russian politicians and observers of Russian politics agree that leadership in Eurasia has to be a priority for any Russian foreign policy strategy (Krickovic & Bratersky, 2016). The significance of Eurasia has been acknowledged many times after Putin came to power. For example, in 2012, in his (third) inaugural speech, Vladimir Putin (2012) stated that:

our prospects as a country and nation depend on us today and on our real achievements in building a new economy and developing modern living standards, on our efforts to look

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after our people and support our families, on our determination in developing our vast expanses from the Baltic to the Pacific, and on our ability to become a leader and center of gravity for the whole of Eurasia.

Russia's claim for regional leadership seems reasonable: Russia is the successor of the Soviet Union, a member of the UN Security Council and the initiator of numerous Russia-centric regional integration projects in Eurasia. Russia is incomparably more powerful militarily and stronger economically than its neighbors. For instance, the GDP of Kazakhstan represents around 10% of Russia's GDP, Belarus—less than 4%, while Armenia's is less than 1%.

However, Russian influence in the post-Soviet region has been steadily declining, albeit at a different rate in different sub-regions and sectors. This was part of multidimensional disintegration of the post-Soviet space (Moshes & Racz, 2019). First, the level of economic interconnectedness of Russia with other post-Soviet countries decreases. The share of intra-CIS trade in Russia's external trade demonstrates a steady downward trend: from around 24% in 1994 to below 15% in 2010 and only 12.5% in 2017 (Deák, 2019, p. 140).

Second, the post-Soviet period was marked by numerous though unsuccessful attempts to organize the space around Russia through regional integration projects. By some accounts no state has initiated as many inter-governmental treaties as has Russia, across various policy areas—from economy to energy and security. “Treaty activism has been at the heart of Russian efforts to restructure its relations with FSU members” (Willerton et al., 2012, p. 61). Numerous regional organizations were initiated by Russia, and all of them shared one distinctive feature—they provided a very limited level of authority delegation to the intergovernmental institutions (Libman, 2020). Similarly, the most recent project—the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)—“has not become the center of power in Eurasia that Moscow had hoped would emerge” (Trenin, 2019). Even Belarus firmly resists Russia's pressure toward “forceful integration.” Post-Soviet nations' dependence on Russia is declining in all important areas: (1) economy and mutual trade; (2) foreign policies and security; (3) culture and media; and (4) the use of Russian language.

Most importantly, Russia is not recognized anymore by the outside world as a regional leader through which other external powers should build their relations with the countries of the region. While Russians present the EAEU and the Belt and Road Initiative as integration projects of equivalent significance, their rhetoric cannot disguise the growing gap between China's and Russia's economic power (Lewis, 2018). Russia is hardly viewed as a regional leader by the post-Soviet nations as well. Thus, the focus of this article is on why Putin's 20 years in power resulted in disintegration of the post-Soviet space despite its importance to Russia.

We start with existing explanations and suggest a new one the inherent trade-offs and inconsistencies of Russia's policies toward the post-Soviet space. We argue that attempts to build the image of Russia as a “great power” provoked the reduction of its actual influence in the post-Soviet region. The more Russia acted as a “Great Power,” the less credible were Putin's promises to respect the national sovereignty of the former Soviet republics. In other words, Putin's global ambitions have hindered the integration of the post-Soviet space and significantly limited its scope.

The 2014 Ukrainian crisis has de-facto completed the separation of Ukraine and Russia that was initiated by the official disintegration of the USSR in 1990. It also made successful post-Soviet re-integration around Russia improbable. After 2014, we could only expect attempts of forceful incorporations of some post-Soviet territories into Russia. However, after 2014, it is also less likely that Russia could sustain forced domination in the region. The impossibility of both integration projects and Russian forced domination in the post-Soviet region does not preclude, of course, some forms of economic and political cooperation between Russia and neighboring post-Soviet states.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. Section “Multiple objectives of Russia's policies in the post-Soviet region” highlights the multiple objectives of Russia's policies in the post-Soviet region. In Section “Before 2014: Russia's strategy of soft domination in the post-Soviet space,” we describe Russia's strategy of soft domination in the post-Soviet space before 2014. Section “An attempt to build an ambitious Eurasian Union” focuses on Putin's ambitious project—to form a powerful supra-national Eurasian Union capable of becoming one of the poles in a multi-polar world. However, Putin's attempt to force Ukraine to join the Eurasian Union provoked the 2014 crisis. We argue that the Ukrainian crisis made successful post-Soviet re-integration around Russia unlikely. Section “Mistrust, hedging, and the cost of dominance” discusses the role of mistrust in the post-soviet region. Section “Conclusion” concludes the article.

## **Multiple objectives of Russia's policies in the post-Soviet region**

Due to a number of structural factors, Russian foreign policy is necessarily multi-vector, multi-tasking, and multi-layered. It has many goals of a fundamentally contradictory nature—most are short-term and pragmatic, others are long-term and strategic. First, its enormous territorial size and a long borderline with numerous neighbors imply that Russia (unlike most smaller countries) encounters a wide range of old and newly emerging foreign policy issues in the Eurasian region. Second, vast natural resources, relatively large population size, significant military might, and

somewhat improved economy allow Russia to play a major role not only in the Eurasian region but also in global affairs. Also, thanks to institutional path dependence Russia remains a key player in the most important international organizations. Thus, we could expect Russia to be willing and capable of engaging in multiple problem spots around the world—from Syria and Libya to Venezuela and African countries.

Most scholars recognize the multiple and contradictory objectives of Russian foreign policy. Nevertheless, for analytical purposes, they often assume that there is some priority objective that can explain most major decisions the Kremlin makes. Arguably, the most popular approach is to derive such a priority objective from various modifications of realist perspectives in the IR theories. These scholars argue that security concerns are the primary motivation of Moscow moves—for instance, actions against Georgia and Ukraine could be aimed to prevent further NATO enlargement (Götz, 2015; Mearsheimer, 2014). Thus, under conditions of global competition, external actors (US, NATO, EU, China) strategically forced Russia to make moves that undermined the prospects of post-Soviet integration, and even reduced Russian influence in the region.

Another group of scholars points out domestic political objectives as the priority of the Russian policies in the post-Soviet space (McFaul, 2014). These objectives could demand hostile actions with regard to some post-Soviet nations. In the long run, those actions could also undermine Russian influence in Eurasia. For example, there was the fear of the so-called “color revolutions” that took place in several former Soviet states (Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004–2005, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005). Moscow saw such pro-democracy uprisings as models that could inspire regime change in Russia as well (Ambrosio, 2016; Charap et al., 2018). However, fierce hostile actions against “color revolutions” provoked a further diminution in trust in Russia among the post-Soviet nations. Closely related are “diversionary” explanations linking Putin’s hostile actions against the former Soviet republics to considerations of domestic political stability and regime consolidation (Filippov, 2009; but see Krickovic & Weber, 2018; Tsygankov, 2015). Importantly, the annexation of Crimea proved to be a particularly powerful and successful instrument to split the pro-democratic opposition. It is widely recognized that unified oppositions present a more potent threat to non-democratic systems than divided oppositions (Armstrong et al., 2020).

In our view, it is quite challenging to outline and rationalize a strategy that could explain recent developments in Russian foreign policy while assuming the existence of a clear priority objective or even a stable hierarchy of objectives. To explain Russia’s failure of leadership in the post-Soviet space, we rely on an analytical framework suggested by Cooley (2012). He argues that that when dealing with the post-Soviet nations, Russia “lacks a single overriding

strategic goal” but instead pursues “a basket of different objectives” ranging from pragmatic short-term urgent priorities to the long-term strategic geopolitical goals (Cooley, 2012, p. 51). These objectives often conflict with each other, and require trade-offs and changes in policy priorities. Thus, it might even appear that the Russian leadership engaged in sub-optimal policy choices in the post-Soviet space. An alternative explanation could be that behind such choices were trade-offs of sustaining domestic legitimacy under the conditions of the economic stagnation since 2008 (Busygina, 2018; Inozemtsev, 2017; Person, 2017; Shevtsova, 2015, see also Yakovlev, 2014).

Surveys indicate that Vladimir Putin’s legitimacy rests on three pillars: domestic order, economic prosperity, and the image of Russia as regional and world “great power” (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016). Since the 2008 economic crisis, a gradual decrease in economic prosperity has led to ever greater reliance in domestic politics on the image of Russia as a “great power.” The needs of preserving and strengthening regime’s domestic legitimacy required actions that helped to develop the domestic image of Russia as a global “great power.”

Theoretically, in the post-Soviet region, Russia’s choices are either to implement forced domination or to build mutual trust and equal partnerships with its neighbors (similar to the EU model). Those are two mutually inconsistent alternatives as any attempt of forceful domination weakens trust. Krickovic and Bratersky (2016) see parallels of Russia’s strategy for regional integration with regional security orders explained by Lake (2009). Thus, according to Lake (2009), within such orders, relations between the hegemon (dominant state) and subordinate states are based on a kind of “contract” recognized by both parties: the dominant state has the right to make certain demands while subordinate states have obligations to comply with its commands (p. 38). In other words, “protection is exchanged for loyalty” (Krickovic & Bratersky, 2016, p. 195). However, Lake focuses primarily on *external* security threats for subordinate states, while Russia is mostly concerned with *internal* threats for the authoritarian post-Soviet political regimes. As Krickovic and Bratersky (2016) argue, “here, Russia has a comparative advantage over other possible security sponsors (such as the United States) in that it is much more tolerant of these regime’s violations of human rights and anti-democratic practices” (p. 196).

All post-Soviet nations hold regular elections, but few political regimes in the region meet democratic standards. Political elites in the region who have depleted their electoral source of legitimacy had to rely on non-electoral strategies to claim legitimacy (Brusis et al., 2016). In particular, they consistently put nation-building and national sovereignty to the top of their political agenda (Del Sordi, 2016). In turn, as Russian leadership prefers non-democratization at the post-Soviet space, Putin’s policy regarding post-Soviet neighbors is based on interactions almost exclusively

with incumbents. Putin has to support post-Soviet incumbents to guarantee that they stay in power. It means, in particular, that pressures from the Russian side on the post-Soviet national leaders should not be too intensive in order not to weaken their domestic political position and thereby avoid the 2014 Ukraine scenario. For the post-Soviet incumbents, there are trade-offs between accepting risks to sovereignty of their nations and obtaining economic concessions, and political and military assistance from Moscow.

Before 2014, Moscow mostly followed the commitments to respect national sovereignty of the post-Soviet nations. Russia provided political incumbents with a combination of benefits and pressures, but without openly encroaching on the integrity and sovereignty of their nations. Most importantly, there were no *de jure* changes in the post-Soviet borders. Although the practice of “soft domination” was often inconsistent with the integration projects, however, arguably there were some chances for eventual success.

Since 2014, the inconsistency between the regional and global agendas has become apparent. The annexation of Crimea marked an open challenge to the system of prevailing international rules and expectations. As Charap and Colton (2018) have argued, the EU and the United States also bore a great deal of responsibility by making Ukraine’s association choices zero-sum, and not trying to find creative ways to also accommodate Russia. However, this was the first time that the administrative borders of the former USSR (now borders of independent nations) were unilaterally revised by Russia.

Kremlin actions during the Ukrainian crisis sent the post-Soviet nations a clear message: in acting as a great power, Russia is not limited in its foreign policy choices by international rules and previous obligations. The annexation of Crimea turned out to be destructive for the Russian regional agenda. As Russian publicist Fedor Lukyanov (2019) admitted, the year 2014 marked “the end of the post-Soviet space as virtual community.”

### **Before 2014: Russia’s strategy of soft domination in the post-Soviet space**

An influential foreign policy expert Dmitri Trenin (2011) has argued that the Russian strategy in Eurasia up to 2014 could be defined as a combination of “soft dominance” against individual countries and attempts to build various integration projects. After Putin came to power, there were indications that Russia was moving away from a traditional “imperial model” to promoting more pragmatic relations with the post-Soviet nations. For example, the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2000, the first one signed by Vladimir Putin (2000), listed among the main priorities

“the development of good neighborly relations and strategic partnership with all CIS member states.” However, during his second presidential term, Vladimir Putin focused on pursuing “*soft dominance in its immediate neighborhood* [italic added]; equality with the world’s principal power centers, China, the European Union, and the United States; and membership in a global multipolar order” (Trenin, 2011, p. 236). Russia started to compete for influence in the post-Soviet space against other centers of power, viewing post-Soviet nations as a “battlefield” between Russia and the West (Krickovic & Weber, 2018). This approach was formulated by experts of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (2017):

most post-Soviet countries could not create a modern state, resistant to destructive external and internal influences. . . . Sovereign status of nation with which Russia borders is a part of a political game between the European Union, the United States, China and Russia.

The Kremlin considered loss of influence in the post-Soviet region as a threat to its aspirations for global power status (Götz, 2015; Larson & Shevchenko, 2019; Malyarenko & Wolff, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2014). Roy Allison (2014) explained that:

Moscow has viewed its wider international standing as linked to its efforts to front a Eurasian set of states with ever more consolidated positions . . . Russian diplomacy castigated EU programs . . . for hindering “natural” processes of Russia-led Eurasian integration—expected to lead towards a Eurasian Economic Union linking most CIS states. (p. 1256)

The Russian strategy of soft domination in the post-Soviet region has developed several effective instruments. First, and most importantly, Russia used a combination of economic concessions and sanctions to limit Western influence in the post-Soviet countries. Second, Russia exploited the so called “frozen conflicts”—internal territorial conflicts between sovereign states and non-recognized breakaway regions (e.g., in Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine). Third, after it became clear that the CIS was too weak as an integration platform, Russia attempted to launch several integration projects with smaller number of participants (e.g., Eurasian Economic Community [EurAsEC] and the Customs Union).

The main problem of the integration projects involving or surrounding Russia is that Moscow cannot commit to them credibly. The partners just do not trust Russia, and there are limited way to build a contractual relationship with its neighbors in the foreseeable future (Willerton et al., 2015). Relations of trust are incompatible with Russia’s growing geopolitical ambitions, that is, with its great-power agenda. The Russian leadership supports a vision of a multipolar world, where each global player has its own sphere of influence (i.e., its own group of dependent

countries). This implies the need to recognize Moscow's sphere of influence over the post-Soviet realm. With such rhetoric, it would be more than naive to expect neighbors to believe that Russia is ready to build contractual relations with them. Nevertheless, before 2014, it was difficult but arguably not impossible for Russia to develop integration projects with its neighbors. Of course, the Russian leaders promoted integration on unequal terms, but the Russian leadership also provided significant incentives to involve smaller countries in the integration projects. Such an approach could probably result in genuine integration, though in the very distant future. Russia's actions with regard to Ukraine in 2013–2014 have put an end to this possibility.

### **An attempt to build an ambitious Eurasian Union**

In Fall 2011, as a part of his pre-election promises, Vladimir Putin declared that during his next term as president he would bring ex-Soviet states into a "Eurasian Union." According to Putin, Russia's goal was to establish a powerful, supra-national union capable of becoming "one of the poles in a future multipolar world" (Krickovic, 2014). At that time, most experts acknowledged the usefulness of the Eurasian Union project for Putin's global ambitions, however they did not expect any significant developments (Kassenova, 2013; Libman & Vinokurov, 2012; Tarr, 2016; Willerton et al., 2015). Some experts pointed at inconsistency between the attempts to create an economic union and that "Russia's primary interest in Eurasian integration is to strengthen its own global influence" (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017, p. 3) while economic integration with Eurasian members "only matter for Russia as a precursor to achieving its political and geopolitical aims" (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017, pp. 3–7).

For their part, the leaders of Belarus and Kazakhstan insisted that the future Eurasian Union had to focus on economic cooperation only. In January 2013, Kazakhstan's then president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, publicly stated that Eurasian integration should not evolve to the point of political union. Around the same time, Lukashenka stated that Belarus would not accept the steps which Russia might want to take in connection with the Eurasian Union if they would be too "radical".

The negotiations to form the Union incrementally developed through non-transparent bargains with potential members, most importantly Ukraine. Gleb Pavlovsky, a former adviser to Putin and currently the head of a political think tank, explained in early 2013 that the Eurasian Union was a very important project for Putin, however Ukraine held the key to its success: "Without Ukraine, he will lose all enthusiasm for it. Without Ukraine, Putin's project is impossible" (as cited in Heritage, 2013).

In Spring 2013, Moscow made it clear that Ukraine must choose between the Eurasian Union project and the European Union. Later Putin warned that if Ukraine concluded the Association Agreement with the European Union, "the Customs Union countries must think about safeguards" (as cited in Åslund, 2013). In fact, Moscow openly threatened to launch a trade war against Ukraine to dissuade it from signing Association Agreement with the European Union. However, after President Viktor Yanukovich postponed signing the EU trade pact in November 2013, public protest erupted in Kiev, eventually leading to the Crimean crisis.

The annexation of Crimea had a significant impact on Putin's approval ratings that jumped from around 65% before the annexation to above 80% thereafter. In the eyes of many Russians, the annexation has confirmed the president's ability to "make Russia great again" (Pinkham, 2017). The enthusiasm of the domestic audience revealed that Russian nationalism in all its forms could serve as an effective political instrument both for the incumbent regime and for the opposition. Thus, the idea of Russia as great power serves as a part of "Putinism" as an ideology (Taylor, 2018) and a marker of loyalty that helps to identify and punish potential critics and political opponents. After 2014, it was reasonable to expect that the calculus of Russian domestic politics would demand further aggressive steps and more "victories" in international policy making. These victories could be achieved without any institutional constraints within Russia (the annexation of Crimea was approved without any discussion in the Council of Federation and by the Constitutional Court).

The annexation of Crimea sent information signals about the regime's possible future actions to various parties. Russian society read this signal with satisfaction and enthusiasm, the West responded with sanctions, and the smaller post-Soviet nations—with fear and anxiety. Indeed, the annexation of Crimea magnified the fears of smaller post-Soviet states vis-à-vis Moscow as it signaled that the borders of post-Soviet states were still not fixed and that Moscow could use military force to annex an adjacent region of the former Soviet republics.

After the annexation of Crimea, as Dmitry Trenin (2019) admitted,

a process of disintegration—of not only the empire but also the historical core of the Russian state [which included the Ukrainian territories]—has become irreversible. Ukraine's break with Russia in political, economic, cultural, and even spiritual terms precludes any possibility of their integration.

After the crisis, Ukraine accelerated the long-term trend of breaking free from Russia's economic influence. As Popescu noted, before 2014, Ukraine's trade with Russia and the EU was almost equal. However, by 2017, it traded three times more with the EU than with Russia (about 40% vs. 12% of Ukraine's external trade structure). He argued that:

as long as Ukraine has a free trade area with the EU and continued mutual trade restrictions with Russia, such trade patterns are likely to remain, and to have long-term consequences for Ukraine's external trade dependencies (and EU and Russian trade leverage), irrespective of the fluctuations in Ukrainian politics. (Popescu, 2018)

The calculation of the post-Soviet nations also had to be adjusted. As Minakov (2018, p. 262) has observed,

none of the post-Soviet nations can exist the way they did before the annexation of Crimea and the Donbas war. All major and minor political players in the post-Soviet region started adapting to the growing insecurity that resulted from Russia's Ukraine policy and other geopolitical players' responses to it.

Most importantly, the annexation of Crimea made it impossible for external actors to trust Moscow in long-term deal making. Such long-term trust and deals are essential for the success of integration projects.

The Crimean crisis triggered the rapid launch of the EAEU without Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> Initially outlined as an ambitious project in 2011, the Eurasian Union was envisioned as a powerful union (comparable to the European Union) to strengthen Russia's global stance (Kirkham, 2016). However, when formally established in 2015, the EAEU focused on selective and pragmatic issues, such as a customs union and a single market, while "the more ambitious elements of supranational political integration were relegated to some indeterminate future" (Sakwa, 2020, p. 168). Initially, Putin had planned to have the founding document of the Union signed in autumn 2014, then he moved it up to June, and then advanced the date again to May (Panfilova, 2014). Some experts see the evidence of Union's success in a greater scope of supranationalism compared to all previous post-Soviet integration projects and in multilateral institutions that are based on the formal recognition of members' equal status. It may seem that the relative success of the EAEU contradicts our argument that Russia's actions against Ukraine have strengthened the fears of smaller post-Soviet countries vis-à-vis Russia.

In fact, however, although the EAEU has relatively strong formal multilateral institutional structures, actual economic and political relations in the Union are mainly based on highly asymmetric bilateral relations between Russia and other member states. In the practice of the EAEU, bilateral arrangements are not mere critically supplement, "but also often supersede, the multilateral framework of the EAEU" (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017, p. 11). Most importantly, "Russia has refused to be constrained within the Eurasian project, as would be expected as a member of a common regime" (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017, p. 2).

After 2014, relations between EAEU members display a combination of formal signs of loyalty to Moscow and various forms of resistance to the growth of Russian influence in their political and public life. Leaders of the smaller

EAEU states have serious incentives not to challenge Russian domination openly. These incentives are different for different countries, including economic dependence (Belarus), unfavorable geopolitical position (Armenia), and/or the presence of a significant Russian-speaking minority (Kazakhstan). Besides that, Russia is still a huge market for post-Soviet states, many of them greatly rely on supplies of Russian energy, and Russian investments are critical for their national economies. Moreover, the region's authoritarian incumbents heavily rely on Russia for political support and legitimacy.

And yet, smaller EAEU members demonstrate striking disobedience to Russia. The most significant manifestation is that they did not support Russia's sanctions against Ukraine: instead, they preferred to develop normal pragmatic relations with both Ukrainian presidents Poroshenko and Zelensky. In October 2019, at the CIS summit, Ashgabat Lukashenka (2019) called on the leaders of the CIS countries to support the President of Ukraine Vladimir Zelensky and to do everything possible to ensure that he remained in power. Zelensky (2019), in turn, called Ukrainians and Belarusians "mentally the same" that did not cause any objection from the Belarusian President. But this definitively is not only about "mental connections." Ukraine remains Belarus's second largest trading partner, and Belarus is Ukraine's fourth largest, and the growth in trade resumed in 2016 and accelerated in 2017 (Belarusdigest, 2017). There are currently 120 cooperation agreements in effect between Ukraine and Belarus, and this number is increasing (Ukrinform, 2019). It is also important to note one dimension of cooperation between two countries which Russia usually neglects—cooperation between the regions and municipalities. In 2019, an agreement was signed in Minsk between the Association of Ukrainian Cities and Belarus' public association Twinned Towns (Kizim, 2018). This practically oriented cooperation can successfully develop on the lower level, aside from Moscow's attention. The members of EAEU also refused to follow Moscow's policies of the Russian "counter-sanctions" imposed by Moscow on imports from the European Union.

### **Mistrust, hedging, and the cost of dominance**

Russia's annexation of Crimea has revealed to the world and the post-Soviet countries the rise of Moscow's power and its resolution to establish the dominance over the region. One could argue that while the post-Soviet nations do not trust Moscow, they also do not trust or even fear other global and regional powers attempting to promote their own leadership in the region—in particular, the United States, China, and Turkey. Should the expected value of a decision to cooperate with Russia be greater than all practical alternatives, the post-Soviet states might choose to accept Russia's dominance even at the significant risk of

Russia's defection from the promises to respect their sovereignty. More generally, for Moscow, there is always an option to rely on instruments of "hard" dominance in the region. However, it is a costly option, and in the absence of mutual trust, the costs of the "hard" dominance in the post-Soviet region for Russia are likely to increase over time—up to an unacceptably high level. The reasons are both theoretical and practical.

Theoretical reasons are explained in detail in the literature on the role of mistrust in international relations (Brugger et al., 2017; Haukkala et al., 2018; Ruzicka & Keating, 2015). In brief, in the absence of trust, the states seek to minimize the risks of unwanted outcomes in their relationship with other states (Hoffman, 2002; Kydd, 2007). First, without mutual trust, states accept only limited form of participation in international institutions as they do not trust the partners to respect the institutional compromises and play by the rules (Rathbun, 2011). In particular, it helps weaker and smaller states to avoid undesirable "spill-over effects" that their powerful partners could promote through development of the existing common institutions. Second, without mutual trust, states hedge their risks to avoid the "worse-case" outcomes (Stiles, 2018). In fact, the theoretical literature argues that the level of trust in international relations could be estimated by the forms of international institutions states accept and by the observed level of hedging (Keating & Ruzicka, 2014).

In the literature, hedging is most commonly understood as an "insurance" method (Lake, 1996, p. 15) of strategically adopting counteracting policies designed to keep a state's options open. Hedging states do not clarify their ultimate patrons and do not take sides, hoping to benefit from a competition the influence and dominance among the global and regional powers. According to Koga (2018), "the hedging strategies are essentially combinations of the "balancing-bandwagoning" spectrum designed to reduce the risks and uncertainties" associated with full dependence only on one power. In the post-Soviet period, Russia's attempts to dominate in the neighborhood provoked various contestation strategies of other global and regional powers by supporting the hedging strategies of the ex-Soviet republics against Russia. The typical hedging strategies of the Russian neighbors are their "multi-vector" foreign policies (Busygina & Filippov, 2020; Mukhametdinov, 2020; Meister, 2018; Preiherman, 2020; Van der Togt et al., 2015). The post-Soviet countries has used the competition among Russia, the United States, the EU, China, and Turkey to serve its own interests to "extract increased benefits, assistance, and better contractual terms" (Cooley, 2012, p. 9).

Kazakhstan's "multi-vector" foreign policy is an example of a successful hedging of both against Russia and China. Vanderhill et al. (2020, p. 980) emphasize that given Russia's historical role as a colonial power in the post-Soviet region, the priority for Kazakhstan is to avoid becoming a client state of Russia, while at the same time

Kazakhstan also fears China's dominance. These authors provide a detailed analysis of Kazakhstan's very carefully calibrated hedging position amid the two regional hegemony (Vanderhill et al., 2020). Preserving its alignments with Moscow, Kazakhstan considers rapprochement with China as valuable option in the overall framework of its developmental strategy that presupposes keeping and even expanding various forms of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The hedging strategy has allowed Kazakhstan not to become client state of any of the two hegemony promoting its own political and economic interests, and clearly asserting and protecting its sovereignty (Ohle et al., 2020 Vanderhill et al. (2020).

From theoretical point of view, the opportunities of hedging create a high asymmetric situation for Russia and the other power, as it is only Russian leadership that wants to dominate in the region. There is little evidence that other global and regional powers also seek hegemony or dominance in the post-Soviet region. Thus, the powers that benefit from supporting the hedging of post-Soviet countries could limit their own efforts and commitments and still successfully spoil the Russian attempts to dominate in the region. Importantly, other powers do not need to agree on any common strategy or even coordinate their actions supporting the hedging against Russia. On the contrary, the Russian leadership needs much more resources to ensure the Russian dominance in the face of the "spoiling" efforts of all other interested powers. Most importantly, the level of support from global and regional powers for the hedging against the Russian dominance is likely to be a function of the Russian efforts to achieve the "absolute threshold" of dominance. In other words, the more Moscow would try to dominate in the region, the more incentives other powers would have to prevent it. In particular, it is because the successful dominance in the region would further promote ambitions of Russia as a global power. All this creates the dynamic of an increasing competition making the "hard" dominance increasingly costly.

In practice, the regional dominance is costly, even under the best conditions (ref). In 2020, Russia remained the world's 11th largest economy in nominal terms (although it ranked sixth, after Germany, adjusted for domestic purchasing power of the Russian currency). After the decline of the energy prices and the slowdown of the economic growth, the financial resources that Moscow could spend on the dominance in the post-Soviet space became severely constrained. For example, in December 2019, after Belarus failed to attract a new loan of up to \$600 million from Russia, Minsk had to negotiate a \$500 million loan from China. In September 2020, Russia announced \$1.5 billion emergency loan to support Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko as tens of thousands protested against his rule across Belarus. Experts agreed that the loan was not sufficient to help Lukashenko prevent his economy from an escalating economic crisis—and that several times larger

amount of money would be needed to help Lukashenka sustaining living standards in Belarus (Cordell, 2020).<sup>2</sup> In fact, this \$1.5 billion loan was not new money, it was mostly a loan refinancing of already existing debt. Comparing the limited assistance in 2019–2020 to the previous level of financial support from Russia to Belarus—it is estimated to be more than \$130 billion for the last 15 years.

The Russian political regime combines formal democratic institutions and informal personalist authoritarian practices (McFaul, 2020). Such “hybrid” regimes often “lack cohesion in their domestic dominant coalition which limits their ability to project a coherent dissemination strategy in their foreign policy” (Frahm & Hoffmann, 2020). In fact, it would be difficult for any regime to sustain public support on spending federal budget on costly geopolitical projects, while cutting planned budget expenses on health care during the global pandemic as well as on the military personal. In Summer 2020, facing around \$40 billion budget revenue shortfall, the Russian Finance Ministry had to suggest austerity measures to cut both military and health care spending in the next federal budgets. Above all, as a prominent Russian expert, Dmiry Trenin (2020) argues, Russia

needs to address its many domestic weaknesses—demographic, economic, political, societal, and technological. Punching above its weight internationally may shore up Russia’s self-respect, but any gains will be lost unless the country does its homework. Russia’s business is, above all, Russia itself.

## Conclusion

Since mid-2000s, Russia increasingly presented itself as a member of the privileged club of “great powers.” Sometime later, scholars of international relations and Russian politics began to debate whether some “grand strategy” underpins Russian foreign policy choices in Putin era (Monaghan, 2013; Neumann, 2016; Sakwa, 2020; Tsygankov, 2011, 2015). For instance, a prominent American military historian Williamson Murray (2019) argues that Putin has proven himself a masterful tactician, who “maneuvers in the present with little regard for the future” and lacks a strategic vision. However, as Monaghan (2013) emphasizes, an analysis of strategy necessarily involves “attempting to see all parts of the whole and how they relate to each other. Thus a full discussion of Russian strategy might involve exploration of a wide range of evolving, detailed issues—economic, military, social and political” (p. 1228). In other words, it is possible there is something we do not take into account or do not know yet or, perhaps there is a part of the Russian strategy (a secret “Putin’s plan”) that has so far remained unrevealed.

However, if Russia indeed has a “grand strategy,” then success of such a strategy would in particular depend on the

consistency of sub-strategies at different levels—from regional to global. Competing for influence in post-Soviet Eurasia has to be a priority of any Russian foreign policy strategy. In fact, according to Mearsheimer (2001), the priority objective of any great power is to secure not just influence but regional hegemony. However, there is little evidence of increasing Russian influence in the post-Soviet space. We explain such a paradox by trade-offs and inconsistencies between Russia’s regional and global agendas. We argue that the more Russia has acted as a “Great Power” and the more global ambitions plans Putin had the less reason the former more Soviet republics had to trust Russia. Without trust it is challenging if not impossible to sustain influence in the post-Soviet region. We argued above that an approach to integration based on (relatively) equitable relations within the EAEU (similar to the EU model) has very low chances of success. More generally, Moscow has only limited ways to build contractual, multilateral relationships with its neighbors in the foreseeable future.

If the post-Soviet states simply do not trust Russia because relations of trust are incompatible with Russia’s current geopolitical ambitions, an alternative for a “great power” to pursue is a strategy of forced domination. This implies increasing pressure on one’s neighbors as well as the willingness to spend more and more resources. It is a dynamic that international relations scholars observe for states wishing to become regional hegemon. The potential regional hegemon needs to achieve an “absolute security threshold,” when its power becomes so dominant that balancing against it is impossible. When a potential hegemon crosses the “absolute security threshold,” the rational response for other states is to bandwagon with it. Similarly, Russia could seek to achieve an “absolute threshold” with regard to its EAEU partners—a situation where they have no choice but to accept Russian dominance. However, at present, there is no evidence that Russia is moving toward an “absolute threshold” situation vis-a-vis its neighbors.

The strategy of forced domination requires two conditions. First, Russia could restore its dominance in the post-Soviet region if the post-Soviet space would be a “closed” system, where external major powers would have no, or very limited access. Then there would be actually no alternative to Russian hegemony. Second, Russia should have large, practically unlimited, material resources that it could invest in developing the dominance relations with the patron states. However, in fact, both of these conditions are unlikely to be present in foreseeable future. The external players (China, the EU, the United States, and Turkey) are likely to increase their presence in the post-Soviet region, and Russia would have to compete with them. Smaller post-Soviet states would continue to develop hedging strategies. The collapse of oil prices and current pandemic crisis have plunged Russia into deep recession and, as this is recognized by the country’s elite, at best, it would take many years before the recovery.

Above we emphasized that there are multiple and contradicting objective of Russian foreign policy. Analytically, one could view Russian foreign policy as a combination of “nested games” at different but inter-connected levels (e.g., global and regional). In this perspective, decision-makers would seek a balance between these levels based on different priorities and agendas. However, in our view, the inconsistencies of Russian policies between the regional and global levels are apparent, in particular, after Putin’s failed attempt to form a powerful Eurasian Union involving Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. Could we rationalize such inconsistencies as parts of a deliberate strategy or are they undesirable by-products of tactical responses? And, could there be a more prudent balance between the attempts to build a global and domestic image of Russia as a “great power” and the damage that such attempts inflict on the perception of Russia among the former Soviet republics?

Focusing on relations with national elites the Kremlin greatly underestimates the significance of public discontent in the post-Soviet countries. The pro-democracy protests can arise—unexpectedly for Russia—and play critical role even in seemingly politically “calm” and loyal countries. The case of Belarus is the most recent example. From all post-Soviet states Belarus has had the most positive record in relations with Russia, since 20 years these two states interacted in the framework of the Union State. Despite the regularly recorded disagreements between the leaders of Russia and Belarus, the Russian leadership unequivocally supported the Lukashenka regime. Massive political protests that began in Belarus in Summer of 2020 demonstrated that the Russian support was not a factor that would determine the attitude of Belarusian citizens toward the national leader. Moreover, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has claimed that the Belarusian opposition “envisions the country’s exit from the Union State with Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and its subsequently joining the European Union and NATO” (Interfax, 2020). In turn, the Russian leadership accused the West of trying to change the government in Belarus. Russian Defense Minister Shoigu claimed that:

with the political and financial support of the West, an attempt was made to change the government in the Republic of Belarus. Among other things, this was done with the aim of disrupting the integration process within the framework of the Union State, causing a split in Russian-Belarusian relations. (Russian Ministry of Defence, 2020)

We conclude by observing that the lack of trust will determine Russia’s relations with its neighbors in the future. Even if the Russian political regime for some reason would suddenly and fundamentally turn toward a more genuine democratic process, years, if not decades, would pass before neighboring countries would believe in the credibility of Moscow’s promises. One should remember how long after the post-World War II it took Germany to move away

from an image of an unpredictable hegemon and to present itself as a “normal country” authentically committed to the European integration project. Post-war Germany had democratic institutions and had severe restrictions in its foreign and security policies, but it took the German leadership several decades to convince other European nations that it would never again aspire to political hegemony in Europe (Bulmer & Paterson, 2013). However, in the absence of European integration and security projects in which Russia acts as a founder member, such a normalization process will be inordinately more difficult.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study was implemented in the framework of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2021.

### Notes

1. EAEU includes now Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.
2. See <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/09/17/russia-emergency-loan-to-belarus-changes-little-for-embattled-lukashenko-a71462>

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