



# Russian Interests, Strategies, and Instruments in the Common Neighbourhood

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Laurynas Jonavicius, Laure Delcour, Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczuk

## Abstract

The paper analyses the peculiarities of the Russian Federation's foreign policy towards the so-called post-soviet countries. It focuses on Russia's policies towards Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and the South Caucasus, with specific attention on how a complexity of foreign policy players, diverse available tools, and geopolitical as well as ideational, economic, and cultural interests are combined into a coherent strategy. The paper argues that despite common strategic goals – geopolitical security and Great Power identity – the interests of powerful domestic players hinder the creation of a consistent and long-term plan for how to achieve strategic goals. The domestic institutional logic of Russia as a Limited Access Order (LAO) creates significant obstacles for long-term planning and makes Russian policy in the post-soviet space tactical rather than strategic. The existing patterns of asymmetrical economic, political, and cultural interdependence of neighbouring countries with Russia allows Moscow to achieve short-term victories. These victories are, however, mainly determined by the rigid use of hard power tools, which in the long run reduces Russia's attractiveness and forces neighbouring countries to look for alternatives.

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## Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. The Russian Perception of International Politics</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3. The Role and Place of Neighbours in the Russian Strategic Perspective</b>	<b>10</b>
3.1 <i>Hegemony</i>	11
3.2 <i>Limited sovereignty</i>	12
<b>4. Russia's Limited Access Order and Its Impact on Foreign Policy</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>5. Russian Foreign Policy Actors</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>6. Russia's Toolbox and Principles of Its Application</b>	<b>20</b>
6.1 <i>Bilateralism and flexible use of conditionality</i>	21
6.2 <i>Russia's variety of foreign policy instruments</i>	22
<b>7. Credibility and Reception</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>8. Conclusions</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>31</b>

## 1. Introduction

The paper analyses Russia's policy towards the neighbouring countries with a focus on the strategies, policies, and instruments adopted in relation to Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, particularly Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova. We demonstrate how the interaction of domestic interests, existing perceptions, and institutional constraints affect Russian behaviour towards the post-Soviet countries in unexpected and surprising ways. We argue that due to the complexity and contradictory nature of these factors, Russian policies towards the post-Soviet states are incoherent and inconsistent, despite the many advantages that Russia has in the region.

Our reasoning stems from the empirical observation that despite the enormous influence and apparent Russian interest, the Kremlin's practical achievements in consolidating its influence in the post-Soviet region remain doubtful. While Russia has been seeking to prevent Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine from integrating with the European Union (EU) and/or North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), it has failed at creating a stable and institutionalized region of countries with shared Russian values, unambiguous (geo)political loyalty to Russia, and similar regime types. The obvious unwillingness of Ukraine to obey Russia's will, permanent quarrels with the totally dependent Belarus, and the permanent need to coerce neighbours to cooperate raise a question: why has Russia failed to establish full control of the post-Soviet space despite its strategic interest, huge economic and cultural influence in the region, and the encompassing toolbox at hand when compared to other external actors?

We answer that question by demonstrating inconsistencies, which arise from the interplay of Russia's self-perception of its status and role in the region, its domestic institutional logic of a Limited Access Order (LAO; North et al. 2009, 2012), and the resulting competing interests of a variety of formal and informal players.

Our analysis starts by showing that Moscow's policies in the post-Soviet states are underpinned by its identity as a Great Power and a distinct civilizational centre, as well as the subjective perception that the West does not take sufficient account of this status (Smith 2014).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, in sections 1 and 2 we argue that Russia's identity as a Great Power, its regional identity as a hegemon, and the treatment of ex-Soviet republics as 'semi-fledged' states in need of Kremlin's patronage form an ideational 'frame' to explain Russia's behaviour in its neighbourhood. Its practical reflection is an attempt to assert control over the post-Soviet states by controlling their growing linkages with other external actors, something which makes regional developments highly dynamic and contested. Russia's negative reaction to the attempts by other external actors to engage in the region is also an additional stimulus for the confrontation between Russia and the West.

At the same time, much of Russia's policy towards the post-Soviet space stems from the domestic political system. Thus, in section 3, we embark on the analysis of the impact of Russia's domestic political order – which fits into the definition of the Limited Access Order (LAO)<sup>2</sup> as described by North et al. (2009, 2012). According to the definition, the critical feature of LAO is the way it solves the problem of violence. Ruling elites – members of

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<sup>1</sup> From the Western perspective, rather than being an 'underachiever', Russia is actually an 'overachiever' – it has been enjoying a status and recognition above its capabilities, not least in the economic realm (Smith 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The opposite to LAO is Open Access Order, which is characterised by three main elements: 1) consolidated organization of military and police forces is subject to the control of the political system; 2) the political system must be constrained by a set of institutions and incentives that limit the illegitimate use of violence; and 3) for a political faction or party to remain in power, it must enjoy the support of economic and social interests, broadly defined (North et al. 2009: 22).

the ‘dominant coalition’ – agree to respect each other’s privileges, including property rights and access to resources and activities. By limiting access to these privileges to members of the dominant coalition, elites create credible incentives to cooperate rather than fight among themselves. Because elites know that violence will reduce their own rents, they have incentives not to fight. Additionally, adequate stability of the rents and thus of the social order requires limiting access and competition by alternative players. In this way, the political system of a LAO manipulates the economic system to produce rents that then secure political order (North et al., 2009: 18). We analyse how the domestic features of Russia’s LAO – ubiquitous, informal, and powerful patron-client relations - are reproduced in Russia’s interactions with neighbours and contribute to inconsistency in its foreign policy due to the need of domestic actors to enhance their power and access to rents. It is the logic of LAOs constituting a parallel system of motives alongside the ideational Great Power ‘frame’ that shapes Russia’s foreign policy in the post-Soviet space.

In this paper we argue that this complex mix of domestic and external factors results in a plethora of frantic and ultimately incoherent foreign policy decisions – resulting in a “dysfunctional foreign policy” (Lo 2015: 66) that is nowhere more visible than in the regional context. That dysfunctionality is analysed in the final sections of the paper (4-6), which, respectively, demonstrate the complexity of actors and their interests within Russia’s foreign policy making, the variety of tools at Russia’s disposition, and the resulting lack of credibility, which characterizes the reception of Russian policies in neighbouring countries.

The paper is structured in the following way. We start with a content analysis of Russia’s main strategic documents in the field of foreign policy, identifying strategic priorities and the general Russian approach to international relations. Next, we demonstrate how Russia’s self-perception translates into a very specific understanding of what Russia should do in the post-Soviet neighbourhood and how it should do it, as well as what the role of EaP countries in Russian foreign policy thinking is. Further, we add the domestic factor into our analysis. We analyse the impact of the key elements of the Russian LAO – informality, preference to stability, balancing of rents and power – on the preferences of foreign policy makers. We show that those preferences encourage the zero-sum logic of behaviour and the pursuance of short-term goals. Although Russia is capable of achieving those short-term goals effectively, the short-time horizon significantly hampers Russia’s longer-term achievements due to the resulting inconsistencies, increasing mistrust and an unpredictable system of incentives and punishments, which Russia applies in its policies (Toal 2017: 298). Finally, in line with the distinction between two broad policy milieux in Russia – the virtual and the “real” (Lo 2015: 3-4), the paper focuses on the ‘real’ policy by examining the sources, actors, and instruments of Russian foreign policy in relations *vis-à-vis* the countries mentioned above.

## 2. The Russian Perception of International Politics

A sense of how Russia perceives the global system and the organizing principles of the relations between global players can be fruitfully gleaned from the recent editions of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept (FPC 2008, 2013, 2016; also see Frear and Mazepus 2017). Four particular beliefs stand out as underpinning Russian view of the international order.

First, the world is in the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar order and “the essence of which is the creation of a polycentric system of international relations” (FPC 2013). Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, in which he claimed that the US over-extended itself geopolitically and that the global balance of power

was shifting in favour of Russia and other large emerging market economies (Putin 2007), serves as a confirmation of that worldview.

Secondly, however, the multipolarity is not an inevitable end state of the world system. Some forces (the West) aim at maintaining a unipolar world structure, dominated by Western interests, values, and institutions, which is a negative process for Russia and a source of international instability:

“The attempts made by Western powers to maintain their positions in the world, including by imposing their point of view on global processes and conducting policy to contain alternative centres of power, leads to greater instability in international relations and growing turbulence on the global and regional levels” (FPC 2016).

Third, Russia’s self-perceived role in the modern world is to become a strong and independent pole of power – with an aspiration to become “a centre of influence in today’s world” (Ibid.). Russian leaders and experts are very explicit on this. For example, the head of the influential Russian Council on Foreign and Defence Policy Sergey Karaganov<sup>3</sup> claims that:

“We want the status of being a great power: We, unfortunately, cannot relinquish that. In the last 300 years, this status has become a part of our genetic makeup. We want to be the heart of greater Eurasia, a region of peace and cooperation. The subcontinent of Europe will also belong to this Eurasia” (Karaganov 2016).

Fourth, Russia favours a growing regionalization of the world. Because of the formation of multipolarity, the world is witnessing a growing regionalization, with “cultural and civilizational diversity of the world and the existence of multiple development models [...] clearer than ever” (FPC 2016). The West with its values and model of (economic) growth is seen as incapable to offer viable responses to new realities (Ibid.). From the Russian perspective, the civilizational and economic rationale for regionalism in the post-Soviet space is a top-down, state-led process.<sup>4</sup>

To sum up, according to official documents, Russia believes that global politics are characterized by the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world, which is inherently turbulent, as the ongoing regionalization underpinning this transition is characterized by a variety of development models at odds with Western preferences (see also Frear and Mazepus 2017). Russia’s foreign policy aim is to put Russia at the heart of this process as a strong and independent centre of power with both *de jure* and *de facto* ability to influence developments. However, Russia’s position is teleological: the shift to multipolarity is regarded as the ‘objective process’ and the promotion of such a (multipolar) system seems to be an objective of Russian foreign policy.

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<sup>3</sup> The Council on Foreign and Defence Policy develops geopolitical strategy concepts for Russia. It includes politicians, economists and former military and intelligence officers. Karaganov is an advisor to Vladimir Putin's presidential administration and deacon of the elite National Research University Higher School of Economics (HEC) in Moscow.

<sup>4</sup> There is a certain degree of flexibility with regard to the civilization, which can denote the narrow Russian/East Slavic and Eurasian conception of Russia-centric civilization. Therefore, as noted by Smith, ‘re-scripting’ of Russia’s ‘near abroad’ in the post-Soviet period can be centred either on an East Slavic core or broader Eurasianism, as both of these conceptions position Russia in the central, pivotal space (Smith 1999).

Similarly, Russian self-perception and the perception of the international order is rather incongruent – the Russian leadership and society regard Russia as a Great Power, and yet the country needs to establish itself as a Great Power, especially against the perceived backdrop of the West’s reluctance to explicitly recognize Russia on those terms. In particular, the United States (US) is viewed as a declining power, and yet Russia is “mired in decidedly old American-centric obsession” (Lo 2015: 98). As a result, “Moscow asserts that the era of American dominance is over, but continues to take the United States as the prime reference point not just for Russian foreign policy but international politics more generally” (Ibid.).

The consequence of such a ‘status inconsistency’ poses the pertinent question of whether Russia is a *status quo* or revisionist player. We argue that, based on its perceptions of the civilizational, normative, economic, and military elements of the current world order, Russia is revisionist in some areas but tends to maintain *status quo* in others.

On the **civilizational level**, Russia perceives the **shift to multipolarity** as a competition between the multicivilizational world and the Western-centric civilization, which in Moscow’s perspective testifies that the Western civilization is only one of many and in no way a dominant one in international politics:

“Global competition takes place on a civilizational level, whereby various values and models of development based on the universal principles of democracy and market economy start to clash and compete against each other. The cultural and civilizational diversity of the world becomes more and more manifest” (FPC 2008, 2013).

Russia’s **normative revisionism** coincides with its development of the concept of “sovereign democracy” (Migranyan 2015; Surkov 2006) and is based on the assumption that attempts to impose the universality of Western values are harmful to the stability and security of the international system. Every country has a legitimate right to choose and foster the values, which reflect its traditions, history, and mentality:

“Competition involves not only human, research and technological capabilities, but has been increasingly gaining a civilizational dimension in the form of **duelling values** (emphasis added). Against this backdrop, attempts to impose values on others can stoke xenophobia, intolerance, and conflict in international affairs, leading ultimately to chaos and an uncontrolled situation in international relations” (FPC 2013).

**Economic revisionism**, which takes the form of **regionalism**, means that a new global economic reality is taking shape amid the accumulation of crises in the Western world (as illustrated in the EU). This new reality is characterized by the fragmentation of the global economic space into regional structures with competing tariff and non-tariff restrictions. This regionalization is seen as a recipe to protect economies from the devastating influence of the Western-dominated process of globalization. “Regional and sub-regional trade and other economic agreements become one of the most important means of protection against crisis phenomena” (NSS 2015).

The above understanding of the way the world is evolving has important implications for the balance of (military) power. The evidence presented in Russian documents would suggest that in **military terms**, Russia is a **revisionist**

power. Russia is seeking to maintain the existing balance of power in the world by containing the expansion of NATO military might and coverage (FPC 2013; Filipov 2016). However, Russia has been developing a military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization<sup>5</sup> (CSTO), and strengthens [military] cooperation with partners in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Military Doctrine 2014). This development is illustrative of the Russian perception that the current [European] security system, which is based on NATO's dominance, is outdated and new mechanisms to maintain global security are needed. The "existing military and political alliances are not capable of countering the full range of challenges and threats the world is currently facing" (FPC 2016).

Taken together, the described elements of how Russia perceives international politics points to a specific set of elements, constituting Russian identity – a returning Great Power and a distinct civilization, seeking a transformation of the international system from unipolarity to multipolarity, and facilitating that transformation by implementing its inherent right to be a civilizational, economic, military, and political pillar.

Those elements, as Toal (2017) explains, also embody a particular geopolitical thinking, based on the specific understanding of Russia's neighbourhood as a particular type of geopolitical field in which Russian spatial identity is (re)created, thus turning the post-Soviet space into a constructed arena of geopolitical competition with other external actors (Ibid.: 51-54). This competition not only encompasses a traditionalist contest for control over territories but also has more nuanced and profound consequences regarding the actual Russian behaviour in the post-Soviet region. Consequently, Russia's perceptions serve as an important instrument in explaining and understanding its behaviour in the closest neighbourhood, which we analyse in the following chapter.

### 3. The Role and Place of Neighbours in the Russian Strategic Perspective

Belarus and Ukraine, in particular, stand out as countries of crucial importance to the Russian identity, security, and status because of their Slavic origins, historical ties, and geopolitical significance (Marshall 2015; Moshes and Nygren 2002; Wolczuk 2003). Belarus has 'privileged' bilateral relations with Russia, is a member of all prominent post-Soviet organizations fostered by Russia (CIS, CSTO, Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)), as well as a part of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, which makes it the most institutionally associated and integrated country among all post-Soviet states. Russia's relationship with Ukraine is of special relevance due to its size, its geo-strategic and economic importance, and its closely connected history, culture and religion (Kappeler 2014), which makes "Ukraine a priority partner within the CIS" (FPC 2013). Russian aims towards these two countries encompass several important dimensions, which are reflected in relations with other countries of the post-soviet space.

First, the **strategic importance** of these countries comes from Russia's self-perception as a Great Power and its self-ascribed role of a civilizational centre (Laruelle 2015: 21). Control of the post-Soviet space is necessary to consolidate this identity, which includes the above mentioned elements of the Great Power, the identity of a distinct civilization with its unique values and traditions, as well as a self-perception as a centre of the Russian World, defined not only in ethnic terms but also as a cultural, religious, and linguistic territory with a common history (Feklyunina 2015: 783). All of them are closely interrelated and imply the Russian perception of the EaP

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<sup>5</sup> CSTO members are the Russian Federation, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Armenia.

countries as, on the one hand, destined for eternal bonds with Russia, and, on the other, destined to have political and cultural developments in line with Russian traditions, norms, and values. Any estrangement would harm Russia's self-perception, regardless of what this entails for these countries and their own preferences. Control over these countries encompasses both the increase of Russia's presence and actions to preclude them from falling into the Western sphere of (geo)political and civilizational influence. From the Russian perspective, in the context of multipolarity, if they are not controlled by Russia, they are dominated by another, competing power. This means a necessity of binding them to Russia economically, politically, institutionally, and personally through various dependencies. Consequently, this also establishes a strong zero-sum mentality in Russian behaviour in the post-Soviet space.

The Russian domestic concern regarding the **stability of its regime** is another dimension that informs Russia's behaviour towards its neighbours. Destabilization of Russian domestic politics and incitement of 'colour revolutions' are seen as threats in Russia (NSS 2015; Military Doctrine 2014). This perception is based on the Russian interpretation of the international causes of the Arab spring, the regime change in former Yugoslavia and, most importantly, the 'colour revolutions' in Georgia and Ukraine. Russian authorities perceive all of them as Western attempts to surround Russia and to weaken it by disrupting its domestic stability and the balance of power (see Statement 2017; Babayan 2016: 5). Based on that, the Kremlin wants to prevent the emergence of democratically governed states at its doorstep that could serve as a source of inspiration and support base for opposition groups and societal actors inside Russia (Gorenburg 2016; Götz 2016: 255;). The achievement of this goal is inevitably related to Russia's capacity to influence political and economic decisions in its near abroad. This dimension informs Russian behaviour in a very specific way – namely, aversion to the cooperation of the EaP countries with the EU because Russia perceives that cooperation as a threat to its national security. The transformation (or democratization) of neighbouring countries is therefore securitized (Allison 2014). This, in turn, prompts Russia to take actions it deems appropriate, which usually aim to strengthen the dependence of these countries on Russia (Cameron and Orenstein 2012) in order to prevent regime change and thereby reduce the role of other actors, such as the US or the EU.

Therefore, the role of the post-Soviet space is paramount in Russian foreign policy. Post-Soviet countries play at least a double role of 'a geopolitical buffer' (Marshall 2015; Mearsheimer 2014) and indispensable "element of Russian national identity" (Zevelev 2016: 4). A mixture of perceptions of this kind, together with the heterogeneity of countries within the post-Soviet space, contribute to Russia's multi-layer policies towards the region. They consist of inter-changing priorities, which produce contradictory goals (e.g. to punish and reward) and induce the application of different instruments and tactics (see Section 5).

### 3.1 *Hegemony*

The above-described elements of the Russian perception of its neighbourhood mean that the Kremlin assigns itself a very specific role in the post-Soviet space, which, following Destradi (2010) can be called 'a regional hegemon'. According to Destradi (2010), regional powers' strategies are placed on a continuum reaching from a unilateral, highly aggressive and coercive – 'imperial' - strategy to an extremely cooperative one, aimed at reaching common goals, which is called 'leading'. In the middle of this continuum, there are different kinds of 'hegemonic' strategies. 'Empire' – the system of domination based on the use or threat of military intervention; 'hegemony' - establishment of an order for the realisation of the hegemon's goals through pressure, the provision of material benefits, or through normative persuasion and socialisation; and 'leadership' – the pursuit of common goals through a socialisation process launched by the regional leader (Destradi, 2010:926). When

applying her criteria, it is clear that Russia eschews empire and leadership. Russia's approach to the post-Soviet states is certainly characterized by a propriety sense of entitlement, something which characterizes empire as well. However, Russia's hegemony is not tantamount to (re-)establishing the empire, which would invariably rely on the extensive use of military power and a highly aggressive, intimidating policy style and rhetoric (Ibid.: 912). Russia instead seeks to exercise power in a more subtle way – involving an array of instruments, and, therefore, not relying exclusively on military means and outright domination. However, if 'softer', benevolent instruments fail to achieve Russia's aim, the Kremlin does resort to military means. Like with empire, the ultimate end of hegemonic behaviour is "always primarily the realization of the hegemon's own goal" (Ibid.: 913), which the Kremlin seeks to exercise by the use of *de facto* veto power over the policy-making of nominally sovereign neighbours.

What is particularly notable in Russia's pursuit of hegemony is the lack of regional leadership. While leadership is a controversial concept, according to Destradi (2010: 922) it denotes the situation when the leader 'leads' a group of neighbouring states to realize the common objectives. Leadership is characterized by the recognition of, and factoring in, smaller countries' preferences and goals into the strategy of the regional power. Therefore, for leadership to occur, there needs to be a **commonality** of interests between the regional power and smaller states, which results in **problem-solving** at a regional level. However, despite Moscow's rhetoric to take responsibility for the provision of collective goods such as security, free trade, energy resources, and financial stability (Krickovic and Bratersky 2016: 180), the provision of these goods to smaller states is consistently and exclusively premised on the compliance with Russian – rather than common – goals. In particular, Russia pursues hegemonic region-building aims (Delcour and Wolczuk 2017) to control the foreign policy choices of the neighbouring states, yet without the onerous responsibility for governing them. Russia does not seek to control domestic institutions and policies but wants to ensure that domestic elites in neighbouring states align their policies with Russia's interests. This allows Russia to act as a "regional gatekeeper" for Eurasia (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017: 6-7). The Russian project of Eurasian integration – the development of the EAEU – is the best example of Russia's hegemonic rather than imperial ambitions. As the largest state in the Union, Russia can dominate the Union and pursue its own trade and economic policies, while limiting the scope for sovereign decision-making of other member states (Ibid.). The EAEU constrains the smaller member states, while Russia refuses to be 'tamed' by the Union it created.

### 3.2 *Limited sovereignty*

A particularly salient feature of Russia's foreign policy in its strategy towards the post-Soviet states is the peculiar notion of **limited sovereignty**. It stems from the Tsarist and Soviet legacies of state formation – the ex-Soviet republics are not regarded as fully-fledged states, which merit sovereignty in the same way that other states do. In practice it means that on the global arena Russia vehemently promotes the principle of sovereignty, while in its relation to post-Soviet states, the Kremlin applies that principle in a very specific way (Allison 2017). *De jure*, Russia pledged to respect the sovereignty of the post-Soviet states.<sup>6</sup> However, notwithstanding international agreements, *de facto* Russia applies the principle of limited sovereignty in the post-Soviet area, which "owes less to the traditional framework of inter-state relations and more to the legacy of the Soviet constitutional model" (Deyermont 2016). As the former Ambassador of the United Kingdom (UK) to the Russian Federation put it:

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<sup>6</sup> For example, with respect to Ukraine, Russia committed to respecting its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity in a number of international agreements documents – the UN Charter, the 1990 Charter of Paris, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, the 1997 Treaty on Friendship and Cooperation, and various other agreements (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2015: 11).

“In the Russian view, these states are to a greater or lesser extent historically part of Russia, acquired independence accidentally rather than through a formal settlement of the post-Cold War order, are intimately linked to Russia through myriad personal and economic connections, and form Russia’s security perimeter. They must, therefore, be recognized as within Russia’s ‘sphere of strategic interests’, and must not be permitted to act in ways or form affiliations that are deemed to be contrary to Russia’s strategic interests” (Giles et al. 2015: 7).

Deyermond (2016: 967) refers to Russia’s notion of post-Soviet sovereignty as “outward looking sovereignty” as it underpins Russia’s efforts to marginalize other actors’ interests and influence within the former Soviet boundaries. In essence, Russia’s notion of limited sovereignty has become tantamount to the recognition of Russia’s hegemonic position and its “privileged interests” (Medvedev 2008) in the post-Soviet space, requiring other actors to factor in Russia’s interests. This would allow Russia to deal with the EU and NATO from a position of a leader of the Eurasian pole – “an intermediary between the post-Soviet states and the West” (Balcer and Petrov 2012: 39).

Importantly, it was a combination of Russia’s hegemonic ambitions, its self-prescribed role as the geopolitical centre and the conception of limited sovereignty that provoked a strong Russian dissatisfaction with the launch of the EaP in 2009, on the grounds that the EaP violated an implicit Russian consent on the nature of EU engagement in the region – namely that the EU would eschew assuming a dominant position in the ‘common’ neighbourhood (Zagorski 2010). The pursuit of legal, comprehensive binding agreements by the EU with its Eastern partners meant that the EU’s relations with the countries of the EaP as well as with Russia were altered. In the latter’s view, other regional powers ought to respect Russia’s hegemonic position and refrain from policies which are deemed to be contrary to Russia’s strategic interests, regardless of these countries’ actual preferences. These actions do not only pertain to military alliances, such as the expansion of NATO, but also to the very right of these countries to enter bilateral trade agreements if they are deemed to contradict Russia’s own aims with regard to these countries (see Dragneva and Wolczuk 2014). Ultimately, preventing the neighbours from developing linkages with other external actors, which may contradict and undermine Russia’s intentions, constitutes the backbone of the Russian strategy in the post-Soviet space.

Therefore, Russian policies towards the EaP countries are implemented within the framework of Moscow’s hegemonic aspirations, the perceived limited sovereignty of neighbours, and what is perceived as an intrusive behaviour of the West. These perceptions and aspirations frame the Kremlin’s self-interest in relations with the neighbouring states. The enactment of this self-interest *vis-à-vis* the post-Soviet states results in adversarial relations with the West (Giles et al. 2015; Lo 2015), despite the fact that these countries have a relatively low priority for Western states and institutions, including the EU.

#### **4. Russia’s Limited Access Order and Its Impact on Foreign Policy**

In addition to perceptions and guiding principles of the external environment, the understanding of Russian foreign policy in its immediate neighbourhood must also include the analysis of domestic factors (Cadier and Light 2015). In this section, we focus on the impact of Russia’s domestic LAO on its foreign policy towards the

post-Soviet states and analyse whether Russia promotes the LAO as a specific foreign policy goal<sup>7</sup>. The contention is that the way Russian political and economic systems work – through informal relations, prevalence of the interests of the ‘dominant coalition’, addiction to rents and the overwhelming interest in maintaining stability – has a profound impact on Russia’s behaviour in the post-Soviet space.

The assumption that Russia itself is a LAO is based on the arguments of various authors who have analysed the creation and change of Russia’s “dominant coalition” (Connolly 2013; Minchenko 2017), the importance of rents for the Russian regime’s stability (Gaddy and Ickes 2013), the constraints of access to power (Yakovlev 2014), the prevalence of informal relations (Ledeneva 2013; Monaghan 2012) and patron-client networks (Hale 2014), and have generally referred to Russia as a LAO (Akindinova et al. 2017; Jonavičius 2016; Weingast 2011). We concur that the nature of the Russian regime, which is created in an opaque, centralized and narrowly-focused decision-making system (Marten 2015a), is maintained predominantly through the development of informal patron-client relations (Hale 2017), and focuses on the internal stability and domestic balance of powerful interests (Soldatov and Rochlitz, forthcoming), has inevitable consequences for Russian foreign policy.

Importantly, the domestic system of a LAO permeates Russian policies towards the post-Soviet space. In particular, the informality underpinning the domestic Russian regime shapes a particular Russian behaviour in the post-Soviet space. As noted above and elsewhere, in the economic sphere Russia seeks to maintain the dependence of the neighbouring countries in the spheres of trade, energy, and migration (both in terms of job opportunities and remittances) by preventing the creation of alternative sources of energy supplies and economic growth (see Cañus et al. 2018). In the political sphere, Russia aims at supporting domestic actors, especially in leadership positions,<sup>8</sup> for whom relations with Russia serve as a source of rent and legitimacy, whose organizational capacities depend on Russian support, and who are easy to manipulate because of this dependence.

The cultivation and promotion of personally dependent domestic actors is a preferred tactic by Russia to maintain the influence in neighbouring countries. Wallander (2007: 117-8) called this phenomenon “transimperialism” - “the extension of Russian patrimonial authoritarianism into a globalized world (...) and a replication of the patron-client relations of power, dependency, rent-seeking and distribution at the transnational level”. Similarly, Conley et al. (2016: X) refer to it as an “unvirtuous circle” - an “opaque network of patronage across the region that Russia uses to influence and direct decision-making, (...) which expands and evolves, in some instances leading to ‘state capture’”. More precisely, Russia uses political or economic penetration to gain influence over critical state institutions, bodies, and the economy and uses this influence to shape national policies and decisions. Rents are the lubricant of this circle (Ibid.) meaning that the interests of Russia’s ruling elite – the creation and distribution of rents as well as sensitivity to internal balance of power – have to be factored in Russia’s foreign policy decisions. As Marten (2015b: 74) argues, “every interaction will be seen as either an offer or payback and every interaction will be personalised”. The informal politics, which underpin the LAO in Russia, spill into policies towards the neighbouring states.

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<sup>7</sup> For more details on the logic of Limited Access Orders see North et al. (2009, 2012). The specific analysis of the impact of LAO in Russia on its foreign policy has been done by Jonavičius (2016).

<sup>8</sup> Importantly, the term leaders here does not only refer to people in official positions, but also to influential players like oligarchs, representatives of security services, formers of public opinion.

Given the nature of the political system in Russia, the question remains whether Russia promotes the LAO in the neighbouring countries as its specific objective. Some argue that Russia is directly supporting authoritarian leaders in neighbouring countries (Tolstrup, 2015). Others, however, disagree that there is a conscious and purposeful ideological 'authoritarian promotion' (Tansey 2016; Way 2016) and argue that what has been perceived as Russian authoritarian promotion was, in fact, a reaction to Western policies, based on pragmatic and security-related interests. Risse and Babayan (2015) claim that illiberal regional powers are likely to respond to Western efforts at democracy promotion in third countries if they perceive challenges to their geostrategic interests in the region or to the survival of their regime (see also Libman and Obydenkova 2014, 2015; Börzel 2015; Headley 2015; Simão 2016; Babayan 2015).

In our view, the empirical analysis of Russia's strategy leads to the presumption that Moscow's hegemonic aspirations *vis-à-vis* the neighbouring countries make the regime type **both the goal and the tool** of Russian foreign policy. The Kremlin does not prioritize democracy or autocracy *per se* – Russia is not a 'normative power' in that sense. Way (2015) demonstrates Russian inconsistency in its preference regarding regime type, as it supported the opposition and greater pluralism in countries where anti-Russian governments were in power, and incumbent autocrats in cases where pro-Russian politicians dominate. Therefore, Russia's main concern and target are opportunities, levers, and channels to influence political and economic decision-making rather than the regime type.

Building on the concept of sovereign democracy (Migranyan 2015; Surkov 2006) and limited sovereignty of post-Soviet states (section 2.2 of this paper), Russia seeks in particular to control the geopolitical orientation of its neighbours, making the political regime a **secondary** goal. As long as Russia is able to control a situation and/or the country displays a 'geopolitical loyalty', Moscow does not interfere in domestic politics. However, whenever reforms by local leadership affect Russian interests or levers of control, Moscow takes action to halt or reverse the undesirable change. The same happens if a neighbour shows interest in geopolitical rapprochement with the West. Russia can employ a whole spectrum of tools at its disposal even against the authoritarian regime if the latter demonstrates a willingness to pursue policies that are regarded as detrimental to Russian interests. This has been a recurring pattern in Moscow's policy towards Belarus – a changing strategy *vis-à-vis* the same leader based on the latter's course of action *vis-à-vis* Russia and/or the West (Frear 2013).

Therefore, a LAO in the neighbourhood is preferable but not necessary nor sufficient for Russia. Moscow's capacity to control is related to the lack of transparency and reliance on rents in a target country (Belostecinic 2017; Conley et al. 2016), but Russia could easily 'work' with leaders who are presumed pro-Western democrats, such as, for example, president Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine (2005-09) through opaque dealings regarding gas contracts, intermediate companies and prices. Thereby, Russia promotes corruption through what Balmaceda (2013: 21) calls "cross-border rent-sharing", which benefits the insiders both in Russia and in target countries. Various asset swap deals, such as acquiring parts of the Belarussian or Moldovan energy transportation infrastructure, benefit not only the insiders in the target countries but also players in Russia (Kazhanov 2017). Being opaque and negotiated at the highest political level, energy contracts with the post-Soviet states provide ample opportunities for generating rents to a much greater extent than longer-term, commercial contacts with EU energy companies.

The way that Russia applies conditionality – while requiring certain action or inaction from its neighbours – illustrates that Russian goals are very rarely about domestic reforms per se and usually focus on the maintenance of the dependence of neighbouring countries on Russia. Since the majority of post-Soviet states remain LAOs (Ademmer et al. 2018) and the elites in these countries strongly rely on Russia in maintaining their power (see Cafus et al. 2018), Russia’s aspiration is mostly stability and prevention of change. This is in sharp contrast with the practice of international financial institutions or the EU, which have endeavoured to link lending or investments to domestic reforms to improve the recipients’ structural environment and overall governance in maximizing the effectiveness of assistance and reducing the risks to return.

Consequently, because Russia’s policy is structured around existing dependencies, Moscow has sought to perpetuate the existing domestic *status quo* (however dysfunctional) in neighbouring countries. For example, Russia has blocked initiatives that would result in decreasing dependencies, such as Moldova’s commitment to the European Energy Community. Upon joining in 2010, as Moldova undertook to implement extensive reforms, Russia conditioned both the reduction of gas prices and the conclusion of longer contracts on renouncing the third energy package, achieving its suspension successfully until 2020. Maintenance of the *status quo* (i.e. dependence on Russia) has been bred through the creation of conditions for rent-seeking. Importantly, in almost every EaP country there are influential players who have made their fortunes (and political influence) due to their relations with Russia (Viktor Medvedchuk, Dmytro Firtash in Ukraine, Bidzina Ivanishvili in Georgia), prompting them to favour the alignment with Russian interests. In Ukraine, for example, the murky pattern of gas purchases and transit fees allowed the elites to extract considerable rents, which reduced the incentives for domestic reforms, investment, and diversification of supplies (Balmaceda 2013). This system gave rise to particular types of loyalty, where opportunistic private interests of powerful domestic actors often defined the national interest of target countries.

## 5. Russian Foreign Policy Actors

The nature of Russia’s domestic order has a significant impact on Russian foreign policy actors and policy-making. Although formally, Russia’s foreign policy is formulated and implemented by actors whose competences are prescribed by legal documents, it is the informal structure of foreign policy-making that matters most (Ganev 2016; Moulioukova 2015). This applies to Russia’s foreign policy in general but it is most salient *vis-à-vis* the post-Soviet states.

According to the Constitution of the Russian Federation (art. 80 par. 3) and the most recent version of the FPC (2016), official foreign policy actors comprise **the President**, who sets foreign policy guidelines, directs foreign policy and represents the Russian Federation in international relations. He is the supreme commander of Russian armed forces and chair of the Security Council. The President also directly controls power ministries of the government (so-called ‘power-block’<sup>9</sup>). The **Russian Parliament** “shapes the legislative framework for the country’s foreign policy and the fulfilment of its international obligations” (FPC 2016). **The government**, and more particularly the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)**, implements foreign policy. Furthermore, there is a

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<sup>9</sup> Those include: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, and the Ministry of Justice.

separate mentioning of the **Security Council** and *Rossotrudnichestvo*<sup>10</sup> (Ibid.). The former formulates foreign and military policy guidelines, assesses threats, makes proposals for the President regarding the adoption of special measures, and coordinates the work of other federal executive bodies (Ibid., Part 103). The latter is instrumental in conducting a uniform foreign policy on international humanitarian cooperation, especially in the post-Soviet area (Ibid., Part 105). Finally, the **federal subjects** of the Russian Federation formally also have a right to engage in international and foreign economic relations (Ibid., Part 106).

However, the analysis of formal structures has limited usefulness without taking into the account the informal logic of the Russian political system, which grants an important role in foreign policy-making to a much broader set of actors, who are able to assert their influence due to established personal ties, controlled resources, information, and instruments of violence. Most importantly:

“each set of players has its own policy, and because of this it is appropriate to consider Russian foreign policy, not as a single coordinated entity but comprising a set of competing ‘foreign policies’ from the time of its initiation and formulation to the time of its implementation and management” (Moulioukova 2015: 45).

As a result, it is impossible to provide a full list of ‘real’ Russian foreign policy makers because this list changes depending on the particular issue on the agenda. However, there are some continuing trends.

Given the formal and institutional weight of the president in Russia, Vladimir Putin can be considered a separate player in his own right (Gabuev 2015). Importantly, it is Putin as a person, not as the institution of the President, who bears more powers. Putin’s personalized role in creating and managing the current Russian vertical of power, his capacity to integrate and control force structures by providing them with rent sources (Treisman 2007), and his own status as a balancer of different interests among the ruling elite (Gill 2016) make him a central figure in foreign policy. Putin’s leading role strongly relies on the work of the **Presidential administration**, which, given its structure and weight, constitute a “parallel cabinet” (Gvosdev and March 2014: 37), capable of defining policies and monitoring their implementation in line with Putin’s requests. Therefore, advisers and aides to the President, the Security Council, and Presidential Commissions<sup>11</sup> are actual foreign policy decision-makers. The role of Putin’s advisers and envoys often implies a much stronger influence than suggested by their official functions as it has been evident by the role of Vladislav Surkov in planning Russian invasions of Georgia and Ukraine (DFRLab 2016) or by Sergey Glazyev’s role in developing the EAEU or managing the destabilization of Ukraine (Umland 2016). The predominance of the President and his entourage also means that official institutions, like the government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, usually serve as implementers rather than deciders of the higher-level decisions. They retain some powers due to a dependence by the leadership on specialist expertise and advice (Lo 2015: 6), but even this leverage is counterbalanced by the President’s preference to rely on information from security services (The Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), The Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU), The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB), see Galeotti 2017a).

<sup>10</sup> The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Cultural Cooperation.

<sup>11</sup> Especially the Commission on Strategic Development of the Fuel and Energy Sector and Environmental Security and the Commission for Military Technology Cooperation with the Foreign States.

Importantly however, notwithstanding his overarching powers and the strongly centralized state apparatus, President Putin is not the sole decision-maker (Trenin 2014). Due to the patronal and limited-access logic which prevails in Russia, Putin's decisions have to respect the domestic balance of power among different members of the dominant coalition. Since their support for the regime is dependent on the possibility to create and accumulate rents, any decision with an effect on rent-creation in foreign countries becomes the object of their attention and competition. Therefore, in addition to the prevailing consensus on strategic goals, influential actors may have competing interests arising from the desire to maximize their personal wealth and power.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, there are at least two types of 'frames', which drive the external behaviour of influential actors: strategic state-related, and individual power-increasing (Kivinen 2012: 62). In practice, such a duality leads to a distinct characteristic of Russian system, which is:

“the discrepancy between the objectives pursued, the rise of Russia as a global power and the organisational strategy deployed, single-minded reliance on strong personal ties. It is the ambitions of a specific elite group that enflames Russian's political imagination. It is its preferred *modus operandi* that renders undeliverable the benefits of good governance” (Ganev 2016: 511).

This discrepancy is illustrated by the presence of different groupings within Russia's elite that unite people of different origins, mentalities and worldviews (see Rutland, forthcoming). Although there is no agreement on the exact number and structure of these groupings (Barbashin and Inozemtsev 2017), Russian foreign policy decisions and instruments vary depending on which grouping's interests are at stake. Consequently, the intersection of interests, powers, and resources available to different groupings affect the choice of policies to be pursued. The groupings can tolerate cohabitation as long as there are enough rents to share among them (individual power-increasing goal).

However, Putin's return to the post in 2012, continuing economic problems and the increased tensions in relations with the West ignited a growing domestic competition for a decreasing pie of (energy) rents. The competition increased tensions and encouraged different actors to fight harder for their part or even to deprive others of access to resources (Jensen 2015). These trends also imposed constraints on Russia's external behaviour due to the collision of different 'frames' of operation. For example, the pursuit of geopolitical goals in Ukraine by the use of hard power instruments significantly hampered the implementation of energy-related goals of Russia's biggest companies (e.g. Gazprom) and bore additional costs thus debilitating the Russian economy (Proedrou 2016). Similarly, when goals of Rosneft and Uralkali clashed in Belarus due to competing power-increasing goals of different actors receiving rents from the oil and fertilizer businesses, this allowed Minsk to withstand the Russian pressure in 2013 (Melnikov et al. 2013), and Lukashenko managed to maintain a useful *status quo*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Different actors have different sources of rents and power, which are indispensable for membership in the dominant coalition. Under specific circumstances, this may become a source of tension and competition, for example between two grand players like Rosneft and Gazprom (Stratfor 2017; Pertsev 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Continuing with the example of Belarus, one may refer to informal relations, based on mutual trust and business interests, which Lukashenko has with the Russian oligarch Gutseriev or the Khotin family in Moscow. Those relations have created a ring of Lukashenko's friends within the Russian elite; these tend to back policies that do not harm Lukashenko's position because their profit also comes from Lukashenko's continuing grip on power. Among those informal friends, one can also find some Russia's regional leaders and strongmen (in Tyumen Oblast, Moscow city, Tatarstan), who have a developed network of mutually beneficial economic relations (RFERL 2016).

The opaque structure of Russian foreign policy players is also a consequence of the deliberate policies by the authorities to mask the true decision-makers in order to minimize the accountability for illegal behaviour. Usually, the aim is to create the impression that the Russian authorities are not involved. Instead, some ‘independent’ actors (Russian Orthodox Church, NGOs, individuals, hackers and many others) are presented as initiators of certain policies.

Although the ‘invisible hand of the Kremlin’ is present in the majority of cases, policies may become incoherent when presumably obedient actors turn into self-interested players. The example of paramilitary and semi-legal actors like Igor Strelkov-Girkin, his sponsor oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, and the All-Russian National Movement is illustrative as these actors made it difficult for the Kremlin to control the events in Donbass (Kofman et al. 2017: 56-57; Baunov 2017). But this also shows how complicated the task of identifying and researching the real actors is. The recent case of a coup in Donbass in the autumn of 2017 also illustrated how the domestic competition of influential actors (GRU and FSB) may tilt Russian behaviour in unexpected directions on the ground (The Warsaw Institute Foundation 2017).

The picture is even more intricate when it comes to **policy implementers**. In addition to such obvious and official players like the MFA and *Rossotrudnichestvo*, there is a wide range of not-so-obvious foreign policy players. **Security services** usually play a role in any country’s foreign policy, but in Russia they have a special status due to the monopoly on information and analysis provided to the President (CSIS 2017: 25-31), and a particular role in managing ‘active measures’ (see Section 5). **Russian armed forces**, especially recently, have acquired pivotal importance ensuring effective use of Russia’s hard power in foreign policy (Ibid.: 31). Russia’s **state-owned enterprises** (Gazprom, Rosneft, Rostec, Rosatom) are also important for the effective implementation of foreign policy, especially in the economic realm.

**Quasi-governmental organizations** like the Russian World, Foundation for Compatriots, the Gorchakov Foundation, Moscow Fund for International Cooperation named after Yuri Dolgoruky and others (Lough et al. 2014) complement foreign activities of *Rossotrudnichestvo*. Federal services *Rosselkhoz nadzor*<sup>14</sup> and *Rospotrebnadzor*<sup>15</sup> have a long history of being carriers of Russian foreign policy due to their role in imposing embargoes on neighbouring countries under the pretext of non-conformity with hygiene and other standards<sup>16</sup>. There is also a wide-spread network of **state-supported NGOs** and public organizations (Rotaru 2017: 8). They popularize Russian language and culture, provide legal and material assistance for the protection of Russian compatriots, spread a Russian version of history, support the development of relations between neighbouring countries, and serve as informal channels of influence (see Mukhametov 2017). In the informational sphere, Russian **state-controlled media** serve as the provider of the positive coverage of Russian activities. The Kremlin has evolved in control over the provision of information and the media more generally (Conley et al. 2016; Kłysiński and Żochowski 2016). Indeed, through the manipulation of information and the use of social media, Russia has acquired a new leverage over the population at large. This is especially salient in Moldova and Armenia, where Russian media are particularly influential.

<sup>14</sup> Russian Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance

<sup>15</sup> Russian Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing

<sup>16</sup> Moldovan and Georgian wines and fruits, Ukrainian sweets, and Belarusian meat and dairy products, as well as many other imported goods from near and far abroad countries have experienced consequences of rigorous supervision by Rosselkhoz nadzor (Besedina and Coupe, 2015).

Russia has also relied upon long-standing ties with **criminal networks**, for instance in Donbass (Kupatadze 2012; Kuzio 2015). According to experts, following the post-EuroMaidan worsening of relations with the West, the Kremlin has increasingly adopted what has been called a ‘mobilisation state’ approach, which also included the Kremlin’s “specific demands of those gangsters susceptible to its pressure” (Galeotti, 2019)<sup>17</sup>. Having a highly criminalized Russian state has led the regime to use criminals from time to time as instruments of its rule (Galeotti, 2017b). Russian-based organised crime groups in Europe have been used for a variety of purposes, including as sources of ‘black cash’, to launch cyber attacks, to wield political influence, to traffic people and goods, and even to carry out targeted assassinations on behalf of the Kremlin (Ibid: 1). Although experts claim that the crowd-sourced approach that has typified the utilization of hackers and criminal networks by the Kremlin in the past is likely to be replaced by more tailored approaches, with the FSB playing a more central role (Connell and Vogler 2017: i), criminal elements will remain important due to the present high level of state criminalization (Galeotti 2017b) and the FSB connections to organized crime (Kuzio 2015).

Last but not least, **the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)** “performs a pastoral mission among peoples who accept the Russian spiritual and cultural tradition” (Kirill 2009) and contributes to the achievement of Russia’s policy goals in neighbouring countries with orthodox communities. According to the ROC, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus constitute the core of the Russian world today but “Moldova is also considered a part of this Russian world” (Ibid.). In a similar vein, the ROC has encouraged its Georgian counterpart to defend traditional Georgian values and reject the non-discrimination law requested by the EU as part of the visa liberalization process. This is very much in line with the Kremlin’s narrative about the West’s attempt to destroy traditional societies. At the same time, the ROC supports the integrity of the canonical territory of the Georgian Orthodox Church, thereby suggesting that it does not back the recognition of Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s independence (Makarychev 2016). This indicates that while sharing the Kremlin’s line, some Russian actors may convey a slightly different message on specific issues.

Summing up, in comparison to other external actors, there is a very broad range of state, quasi-state and non-state actors that have a stake in Russian policies towards the EaP countries. This results from two factors: the long-standing and multifaceted interdependencies linking Russia with the EaP countries; and the combination of a highly centralized and vertical system with the important role of informal networks in Russia’s political regime. The latter, in particular, makes it especially challenging to establish who conducts Russia’s foreign policy and to identify stable patterns in this regard (Mankoff 2012: 53). Ultimately, due to this decision-making context, Russian behaviour is often situational and event-driven rather than consistent and predictable. As will be argued below, the variety of instruments available to those players, and the principles of their application, make the general picture even more opaque.

## 6. Russia’s Toolbox and Principles of Its Application

Despite the fact that the ‘near abroad’ has featured prominently in Russia’s foreign policy strategy, the policy *vis-à-vis* EaP countries has been hardly coherent (Jonson 2004). Similarly, despite Russia’s access to a highly diverse set of instruments, which is illustrated below, their use has not necessarily been consistent or predictable. The lack of both coherence and predictability bears major (even if varying over time) implications for the effectiveness of Russia’s approach.

## 6.1 *Bilateralism and flexible use of conditionality*

When it comes to the practical application of available instruments in Russian policies towards neighbouring countries, several characteristic aspects of Russian behaviour are worth outlining.

First, Russian behaviour in general and specifically towards the post-Soviet countries is characterized by a strong **preference for bilateralism**, which distinguishes Moscow from Brussels and Washington (Skriba 2016: 611). This is despite the fact that regional integration in the post-Soviet space has been Russia's long-term priority. As will be noted below, many of the sectoral instruments Russia has used have served to support Russia's integration-building agenda. Yet, despite the symbolic prominence of creating a unifying multilateral platform, Russia has in practice preferred bilateral engagements. To a large extent, initially this was because of Russia's unwillingness to expend extensive resources (Jonson 2004). For example, unwilling to bear the costs of creating a viable free-trade area in the 1990's, Russia shifted to a pragmatic approach with an emphasis on bilateral relations centred on specific issues and sectors (Cooper 2009; Dragneva and de Kort 2007). This began to change in the 2000s as a result of Russia's increased resources stemming from rising energy prices and a growing sense of urgency around the perceived Western encroachment upon Russia's 'sphere of influence'. Russia became prepared to incur the costs of regional integration as it served its foreign policy objectives (Vinokurov 2007). This priority grew particularly in light of the perceived invasion of Russia's space by the development of the EU's Eastern policy, NATO's expansion, and the West's alleged role in the post-Soviet 'colour revolutions' (Zagorski 2010). However, integration became reserved for a small coalition of like-minded states, eventually evolving to the launch of the EAEU in 2015. Even though in formal terms this was Russia's most far-reaching multilateral project, it continued to be based on bilateral deals between Russia and its partners, reinforcing the power dynamics of relations (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017).

This use of bilateral relations, in our view, asserts Russia's superior bargaining position, and thereby makes the deployment of its toolbox more effective in relations to post-soviet countries due to their high dependency.

Second, Russian behaviour in post-Soviet countries is distinguished by its **flexibility**, which is most clearly seen in the way the Kremlin applies conditionality towards its post-Soviet neighbours. Russia's deployment of its economic instruments, for example, has been subject to some economic justification: energy price rises have sought to protect Russia from extensive losses of revenue. Similarly, trade protection measures, as with other countries, have been activated to mitigate the painful consequences of the global economic crisis. Yet, Russia has predominantly used its hooks as a vehicle to achieve alignment of the neighbours' policies with Russia's geopolitical and security preferences in the region, as discussed above.

Russia has shown equal agility in applying **positive as well as negative conditionality**. Its effort to induce its partner's actions has been especially pronounced in promising rewards to secure its dominant (hegemonic) position in the region and to prevent the growth of influence of other external actors. For the period from 2011 to 2012, for example, Russia offered to lower gas prices (from \$425 to \$168/ thousand cubic meters (tcm)) if Ukraine were to accede to the newly formed Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) (Wolczuk 2016). In the autumn of 2013, in its effort to prevent the impending signing of the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU, Russia offered a revised discount – to reduce the gas price from approximately \$400 to \$268 in addition to offering a \$15 billion loan, just for not signing the AA (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2015). Crucially, despite providing a financial bailout for

Ukraine, the Russian leadership did not make it conditional on any domestic reforms in Ukraine. Similarly, a limited price discount was offered to entice Armenia to join the ECU in 2013.<sup>18</sup> Energy discounts and trade concessions, actual or promised, have also been fundamental to Russia's relations with Belarus, ritually renewed at junctions where Russia needed Belarus's support for the progression of Eurasian integration.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, Russia has deployed its toolbox to threaten against deviation or penalize departures from its preferred behaviour. In 2011, trade penalties *vis-à-vis* Ukraine, for example, were explicitly linked to its refusal to join Russia's Customs Union (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2015). Extensive sanctions were also deployed to Moldova and Georgia for signing the AA with the EU (Cenusa et al. 2014). Similarly, Russia did not hesitate to heighten Armenia's security concerns, concluding a massive arms sale deal with Azerbaijan to deter Armenia from initialising an AA with the EU in November 2013 (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015). Russia also threatened Armenia with a massive increase in gas prices should the country sign the AA/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA).

In this context, Russia has been in sole control of judging the extent to which the positive or negative conditions have been satisfied. Notably, the use of conditionality has entailed flexible goal-posts. For example, in the early 2000s, Russia accepted the decision of Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia to become observers to the Eurasian Economic Community (as opposed to full members) as a sufficient sign of allegiance. This broad alignment, though disappointing for Moscow, was enough for it to continue to extend special privileges to its allies. Yet, this was not the case following the launch of the Eurasian Customs Union, especially as the prospect of these countries signing an AA with the EU grew realistic. During its campaign in Ukraine, the Kremlin made it clear that it was interested in Ukraine's full membership in the Eurasian Customs Union and that no flexible formats allowing Kiev association with the EU would suffice (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2015). In the end, as Ukraine proved to be harder than Armenia to persuade to join the Eurasian project, Russia focused on simply dissuading President Yanukovich from signing the AA.

On balance, the pervasive conditionality use of key sectoral policies entails an inherent unpredictability. For the target country, it makes long-term economic planning extremely difficult, thus maximizing its negative impact. At the same time, it can be argued that for Russia this approach is resource intensive, given the degree of improvisation in finding the mix that would work in the particular circumstances. It is also inherently illustrative of a predominance of the short-term thinking in Russia, which certainly does little to bring in policy coherence and prepare for potential risks, as evidenced following what seemed to be a series of done deals with President Yanukovich in the autumn of 2013.

## 6.2 *Russia's variety of foreign policy instruments*

Compared to other external actors, Russia stands out in terms of the wide set of instruments it uses in engaging with the EaP countries and in the existing interdependencies with those countries. The Kremlin has demonstrated both its versatility in deploying multiple and overlapping tools of influence, and extensive skills in tailoring its toolbox to the conditions in individual countries. In this section, we provide an analytical review of the

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<sup>18</sup> According to Richard Giragosyan, the actual discount was only \$50/tcm indicating the sheer vulnerability of Armenia to high gas prices (author's conversation, September 2017)

<sup>19</sup> For example, in June 2010, at the launch of the Customs Union, in April 2014 prior to signing the EAEU treaty.

instruments used, building (but not duplicating) the extensive empirical discussion of interdependencies between Russia and the EaP countries which has been conducted in other EU-STRAT working papers (Całus et al. 2018)

**Economic power and trade dependencies.** Following the break-up of the USSR, the post-Soviet countries inherited economic structures developed according to the logic of central planning. This legacy entailed a strong dependence on Russia regarding production capacity and the supply of key commodities, but also key transport, energy and power infrastructure (van Selm 1997; Brill Olcott et al. 1999). Despite the contraction in intra-CIS trade, breakdown in old economic links, and growth in trade reorientation, Russia remained critical in terms of market access and supply for the EaP countries for most of the 1990s and early 2000s.

This dependence was particularly strong in relation to certain ‘sensitive’ goods, particularly food and agricultural products (Całus et al. 2018). Trade policy with regard to such goods became an important tool in relations between Russia and its neighbours. Notably, free trade agreements with Russia contained exemptions in such goods, which were the subject to frequent renegotiations in separate protocols, thus providing a continuous leverage (Dragneva and de Kort 2007). While the percentage of these products in the total mutual trade was not huge, their concentration amounted to disproportionately high effects (Freinkman et al. 2004: 47), and was thus an effective pressure point. Even more damaging was the prevalent use of trade protection measures, such as temporary quotas or bans, and anti-dumping measures. Such measures plagued Russia’s relations with Ukraine, in particular, yet contributed to an overall uncertainty and lack of predictability in trade in the whole region. Overall, unilateral departures from the commitments were undertaken and the use of discriminatory trade protection measures abounded (Brill Olcott et al. 1999; Szeptycki 2008).

In this sense, it is unsurprising that free and predictable trade remained the policy priority of the EaP countries in their relations with Russia, allowing them to use the promise of it as an important element of their toolbox. Russia finally agreed to conclude a multilateral free trade agreement within the CIS in 2011,<sup>20</sup> which was widely expected by its partners to deliver on this goal. In reality, the Kremlin quickly reneged on it, deploying extensive trade penalties and other forms of economic coercion *vis-à-vis* those countries engaged in an AA/DCFTA with the EU – Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia (Cenusa et al. 2014; Wegren and Nikulin 2016). However, while Russia introduced punitive trade measures toward Moldova and Ukraine (e.g. introduction of bans and trade restrictions, cancellation of tariff-free preferences) to retaliate against the AA/DCFTA, it reacted surprisingly softly *vis-à-vis* Georgia. This was due to the fact that the signature of AA/DCFTA coincided with the normalization of Russian-Georgian ties after the conflict in 2008.

Regardless of its privileged status as a partner in the Eurasian integration project, also Belarus has experienced trade restrictions (Bohdan 2012; Całus et al. 2018). While ‘trade wars’ have not necessarily been about tariffs, they have shown Russia’s propensity to use customs procedure and discriminatory use of sanitary and phytosanitary policy to affect the relations with Belarus (Leukavets 2017).

**Energy Dependency.** Russia’s clearest use of economic power *vis-à-vis* its neighbours, however, has been through the **influence in the energy sector**. Mineral fuel has continuously held the highest share in total exports

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<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that Russia previously signed the CIS free trade agreements, in 1994 and 1999, it never ratified them (Dragneva and de Kort 2007).

to the CIS (Freinkman et al. 2004). This leverage was maximized as Russia's neighbours were addicted to energy subsidies, exacerbated by low industrial and household energy efficiency and resistance to reform. Russia continued to subsidize oil and gas supplies to the post-Soviet states, demonstrating particular agility in turning them into a central tool of its foreign policy. Russia's energy tools routinely include:

- Varied **energy prices** across the post-Soviet space: demanding higher prices and faster rises for states pursuing what was perceived in Moscow as unfriendly policies (Newnham 2011: 139). As with trade exemptions, this was facilitated by the use of short-term contracts, requiring regular renewal. Ukraine was amongst the states that have seen the highest energy price rises. For example, following the Orange Revolution, Russia attempted to increase prices nearly five-fold – from \$50/tcm to \$235/tcm in 2005 (Pirani 2012: 176). While in 2013 Belarus paid only \$167/tcm for natural gas, Russia demanded about \$400/tcm from Ukraine.
- Russia has used **energy debts** accumulated over time as another key source of leverage. Moldova and Armenia, particularly vulnerable countries (Ademmer 2016), improved their position only after ceding extensive property rights to the gas and pipeline infrastructure as well as the regional distribution companies to Gazprom. Similarly, Russia ended up almost completely controlling the gas infrastructure of Belarus, Moldova (Całus et al. 2018) and Armenia. For example, the status of Gazprom as the sole supplier of gas to Belarus and Armenia strongly contributed to the acquisition of the Belarusian and Armenian major gas infrastructure by Russia and strengthened the pre-existing energy dependencies.
- Russia did not shy away from **cutting energy supplies** if the partner countries were unwilling to satisfy its demands, even at the expense of harming its Western markets. When Ukraine refused to agree to Russia's price rises, Moscow halted gas supplies to Ukraine in the middle of the winter (in 2006 and 2009), which in turn limited supplies to countries in Europe. All this allowed Russia to cause immediate and extremely costly consequences, making energy into the most common pressure point in dealing with the EaP countries.

It is important to stress that the Kremlin made energy prices and resolution of supply and contract disputes conditional upon compliance with its own specific aims, be it sectoral (e.g. gaining control over the energy infrastructure) or regional (joining the regional integration projects), rather than using conditionality to promote broader reforms in the notoriously corrupt and inefficient energy sectors in the target countries.

**Migration dependencies.** While perhaps less visible than in the energy sector, Russia has used migration flows as a key economic and societal leverage over the EaP countries. Such a leverage is premised upon the crucial role of Russia as a destination for migrants<sup>21</sup> (primarily workers) from the EaP countries. Starting in the 2000s, sustained economic growth in Russia, combined with the lack of both visas and language barriers, has only increased Russia's attractiveness as a destination for labour migrants from the EaP countries (Delcour et al. 2017). Russia has deployed a variety of migration tools to influence the EaP countries, including:

- The unilateral introduction/withdrawal of a visa regime: in a context characterized by increasingly tense relations, Russia unilaterally introduced a visa obligation on Georgian citizens (with the exception of

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<sup>21</sup> It is particularly difficult to get a clear picture of inbound migration flows to Russia. This is due to both the limited relevance of specific indicators when used in isolation (e.g. citizenship, country of birth) and the importance of irregular migration (e.g. overstay).

citizens living in the two secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who benefited from a simplified border-crossing procedure) in December 2000. While Georgia is the only post-Soviet country (together with Turkmenistan) that has experienced a visa regime from Russia, conditions for obtaining a Russian visa became significantly tougher after the 2008 conflict. In contrast to the post-conflict period, Russia decided in late 2015 to facilitate the visa regime for Georgian citizens, in the context of the so-called ‘normalization’ of links between the two countries. A potential withdrawal of the visa regime (suggested by President Putin without any clear conditions or timetable attached) thus appears as a powerful ‘reward’ to influence Georgia.

- Restricted access to Russia’s labour market: the much stricter requirements introduced by Russia in 2014 for migrants to obtain a work permit (e.g. pre-payment of taxes, medical insurance and exam, need to apply for a permit within 30 days from arrival) target especially those EaP countries that have chosen not to join Russia’s regional integration initiatives, i.e. Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. By contrast, freedom of movement under the EAEU entails the right for citizens from Armenia and Belarus to work in Russia without any permit. Therefore, the Kremlin has used restrictions to Russia’s labour market to punish those countries seeking closer ties with the EU, while it has adopted *ad hoc* legal solutions to exempt part of their populations from these stricter rules. For instance, in the wake of the 2014 conflict Russia has sought to encourage migration from (mostly eastern) Ukraine by removing work permit quotas and allowing unlimited extensions of the normal registration period for Ukrainian citizens
- Expulsion of migrants: Stricter migration rules have been used arbitrarily as a tool to retaliate against those foreign policy choices which were regarded as contradictory to Moscow’s interests. In 2006, Georgia was the first country to experience massive expulsions of its migrants in the wake of a diplomatic row with Moscow. After expelling Moldovan migrants who had allegedly infringed Russia’s migration rules, Russia relaxed its pressure on Moldova by introducing the possibility of an amnesty; this came shortly before president Igor Dodon announced that his country would be seeking an observer status in the EAEU (Caľus et al. 2018). If anything, this confirmed the subordination of migration rules to Russia’s overarching foreign policy objectives.

Russia’s leverage on migration flows, however, encounters limitations. The 2008 economic crisis that hit Russia severely caused an abrupt decrease in remittances from labour migrants to their countries, thereby partially depriving Russia of a major incentive or punitive measure in the first half of the 2010s.

**Political influence.** The above-mentioned principle of limited sovereignty specifically complements the Russian toolbox by adding a self-granted right to interfere with domestic political processes of the EaP countries, especially during the elections. This interference took various forms – from the provision of finance to the more or less subtle expressions of political support. Its most extreme form took place when Russia supported Victor Yanukovich as ‘its’ candidate and engaged in seeking to discredit his opponent in the 2004 presidential elections in Ukraine (Kuzio 2005). Moldova currently offers another example of open political support: Russia not only backed the emergence of the Party of Socialists and its leader Igor Dodon but, in the current context of polarization in Moldova, used the whole array of its tools to sway the political balance in his favour in the run-up to the 2018 parliamentary elections. Once providing its support, Russia expected the loyalty of its favoured candidate. As observed by Conley (2017), Russia does not shy away from infiltrating the domestic sphere of neighbouring countries by providing support for anti-European fringe parties, by hooking up influential individuals (possibly businessmen turned politicians or aspiring autocrats), or by cooperating and supporting

NGOs that help spread pro-Russian ideas and policies. A direct involvement into the political process enables Russia to promote certain values and ideas and to foster networks of patronage that it can rely on.

**Societal influences.** Humanitarian and cultural cooperation has always been important to Russia, based on the shared history and language of the post-Soviet space. With Putin's rise to power in the 2000s, societal influences gained significant importance in Russia's policy in the region. Russia developed a toolbox for cultural cooperation in the 'near abroad', with the creation of *Rossotrudnichestvo* aimed at promoting the Russian language as well as cultural and scientific exchanges. As noted by Antoun et al. (2015), Russian compatriots' policy serves as an instrument to strengthen the Kremlin's argument that there is a 'Russian world' larger than Russia itself that lends legitimacy to both Russia's Great Power status and its regional aspirations. Since the meaning of compatriots usually encompasses not only cultural but also political affiliation with Russia, their existence strengthens Russia's political influence and provides some political, economic, and military intelligence. They also serve as a potential source of unrest or any other lever to affect local authorities. By assuming the responsibility for a full protection of the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad, Russia also lays out a legal basis for its intervention into the internal affairs of neighbouring countries under cover of protection of compatriots' rights (Allison 2014).

The Ukraine crisis created a context for the revived use of historical and ethnic narratives in justifying Russia's influence and action. This is despite the fact that some of the concepts used by Russia, such as 'Russian world', are in essence fuzzy and do not form a well-structured doctrine (Laruelle 2015). Yet, their ambivalence enables Russia to mobilize and operationalize them on an *ad hoc* basis. Other concepts, such as *Novorossiia*, are used ex-post as a 'live mythmaking process' (Laruelle 2016) to validate Russia's actions, in this case, support to rebels in the Donbass.

**Military power.** Relative to other external actors, Russia stands out in its extensive influence over the security of its neighbours. In Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and to a lesser extent Azerbaijan, Russia has sought to destabilize (what it perceived as) unfriendly regimes, thus acting as a security threat. This leverage stems from the pivotal role it played in the 1990s in the conflicts that erupted in Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia; and the ceasefires that put an end to the hostilities. However, Russia's role was at best ambiguous. It supported the breakaway regions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh when these fought against the central authorities of Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan, respectively. At the same time, in a context characterized by the weak security involvement of other external actors in the region, Russia was central in brokering the deals that brought armed hostilities to a conclusion (but did not solve the conflicts) and in providing peacekeepers. The *status quo* (i.e. the end of active hostilities combined with the persistence of conflict situations) thus provides Russia with powerful leverage over Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan (Całus et al. 2018).

In essence, since the early 2000s, Russia has extensively used breakaway regions as pressure points over these countries, employing a broad range of instruments. It has sought to undermine the EaP countries' sovereignty by supporting their breakaway regions' separatist aspirations (e.g. the passportization policy in Georgia's breakaway regions; the increasingly differentiated treatment of Gagauzian enterprises and citizens as compared to the rest of Moldova) and securing loyal political structures and administrations (e.g. in Transnistria) (Całus et al. 2018). When faced with a perceived major threat (e.g. the perspective, even if uncertain, of NATO's enlargement), Russia has intervened militarily, openly violating Georgia's territorial integrity in 2008. Russia's

military interference and unilateral recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence (combined with massive economic and military support to these regions) were in clear breach of international law. They signalled a shift in Russia's toolbox in EaP countries: for the first time since the 1990s, Russia made it clear that it was prepared to use force to preserve its sphere of influence and challenge the post-Cold War European security order.

By contrast, Russia has conducted a parallel policy of "managed stability" (Tolstrup 2009: 931) and acted as a security provider *vis-à-vis* those countries that it regarded as friendly. Russia's strong military presence in Armenia<sup>22</sup> is crucial for the country's security in light of the conflict with Azerbaijan. Despite the fact that the organization does not cover Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia has also used the CSTO to bind Armenia more tightly to its sphere of influence (Kropatcheva 2016). Thus, Moscow has not hesitated to reverse its strategies when its strategic interests have been threatened. Russia can also act as an 'insecurity provider' for friendly countries in instances when it considers its supreme interests to be threatened.

**'Active measures'**. Since Putin's return to power in 2012, the Kremlin has accelerated its efforts to resurrect the arsenal of 'active measures' – tools of political warfare once used by the Soviet Union that aimed to influence world events through the manipulation of media, society, and politics (Polyakova 2016). These tools, among others, include forgery, disinformation, cyber-attacks, hybrid warfare, and deliberate manipulation of social media and are applied extensively not only in the post-Soviet space but also to a much larger extent on a global scale (Global Security 2017; Kragh and Åsberg 2017). These measures are especially problematic to examine. They are of quasi-legal and informal nature; they constitute a complex network of interdependencies difficult to trace; they weaponize information, culture, and money (Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014). In contrast to other instruments, they cultivate local support, proxies, resources, and create opportunities that might be exploited later instead of seeking an immediate impact.

Apart from the military deployment, the post-Soviet states became an arena for a more selective, discretionary use of violence – through ex-territorial killings and abductions in the post-Soviet countries (Darczewska and Żochowski 2017). This type of violent incidents mirrors such use of violence in Russia through the example of killings of opposition figures or human rights activists (such as Boris Nemtsov). This extra-jurisdictional use of coercive capacity of Russia again further underscores the weakness of the neighbouring states and the perception that Russia can act with impunity within the post-Soviet space, thereby reinforcing the notion of limited sovereignty.

## 7. Credibility and Reception

Understanding Russia's toolbox also requires a discussion of its credibility. This credibility, in our view, is quite problematic. First, while the short-term nature of the governing frameworks, such as annual or biannual contracts on trade exemptions or gas prices, allows for a quick and adaptable deployment of tools, it also entails a perpetual lack of certainty. In this context, rewards are uncertain and affect the client's commitment. This tendency is exacerbated by the fact that none of Russia's tools is embedded in enforceable regimes. In the absence of rule-based constraints or guarantees for implementation, political contingencies rule. In 2010, for

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<sup>22</sup> Russia maintains the 102<sup>nd</sup> military base located in Gyumri and an airbase at Yerevan's Erebuni Airport.

example, Ukraine's leadership secured a range of benefits, including low gas prices, in exchange for extending the lease of the Sevastopol naval base. Yet, Ukraine not only failed to receive the promised benefits but also became the target for escalated demands for control over gas production (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2015).

Second, while the credibility of Russia's promises has been highly problematic, the credibility of Russia's threats appears higher as these threats have materialized on numerous occasions. Nonetheless, they have also shown to 'backfire'. Threats are associated with a degree of uncertainty, which enables Russia to maintain a huge degree of pressure over the EaP countries, as illustrated by the example of migration. In 2014, Russia introduced much stricter requirements for labour migrants from CIS countries, as a result of which it expelled Moldovan migrants allegedly infringing migration laws. These cases were meant to send a clear signal to Moldova that Russia could initiate a massive expulsion, given that most Moldovan labour migrants stay and work illegally in the Russian Federation. While this threat has not materialized thus far, it is looming large over Moldova subject to the political evolution of the country.<sup>23</sup> In a similar vein, the combination of multilateral and bilateral regimes enables Russia to maximize ambiguity and therefore opens windows of opportunity for later threats. For instance, while the EAEU foresees the free movement of labour between the member countries, in July 2014 Russia signed a new agreement with Armenia (then a candidate country) on the terms of entry for citizens travelling between the two countries (Schenk 2017), which means that Russia maintains a bilateral leverage against Armenia and may ignore its multilateral commitments under EAEU. Thus, Russia's ability to formulate credible threats stems from its unpredictable and arbitrary exploitation of policy and legal frameworks. Also, Russia's ability to punish severely has become beyond doubt, as military action in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 showed.

While this blunt use of power has served to achieve Russian foreign policy goals, it has also increased sovereignty sensitivity across the region. For example, Belarus's president Lukashenko has become more concerned about leveraging Russia's dominance but also sought to extract further benefits in exchange for his continued loyalty. Thus, Russia has perpetuated the cycle of trade-offs, but also the 'make-as-you-go' mode of policy-making.

Third, the deployment of Russia's toolbox has been premised on a particular type of international relations where deals are concluded in a highly centralized and non-transparent manner. This was most aptly demonstrated in the dealings with Armenia's and Ukraine's leadership in the autumn of 2013 in seeking to dissuade them from concluding the AA with the EU. While Russia's strategy worked in affecting the leaderships' current incentives, it certainly lacked wider public legitimacy. In Armenia, this legitimacy crisis was averted largely by appealing to the country's national security interests. In Ukraine, however, it opened the gap between the interests of the ruling elite and the population at large, which associated Russia's influence with a perpetuation of a particular mode of corrupt and coercive governance.

## 8. Conclusions

Russia is a complex actor within the region, which possesses a broad range of instruments to pursue a variety of goals. In the understanding of Moscow's elites, countries bordering Russia's territory in the West and the South-West have the role of a geopolitical buffer against the West. Concomitantly, they also play a role in Russia's self-

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<sup>23</sup> Remittances constitute about a quarter of Moldova's GDP and a sufficient part of them come from Moldovans working in Russia.

perception as a Great Power centred on its unique civilization. The Kremlin assumes for itself a special role in the post-Soviet space and aims at establishing geopolitical and civilizational hegemony in the region.

Russia is a proactive player, trying to establish its dominance in the political, economic and ideological spheres of its neighbouring countries. Consequently, the Kremlin perceives any interactions and linkages between neighbouring countries and external actors as a threat to its national interests. In the understanding of the Russian leaders, its main rivals in the region are the EU, the US and NATO, and the member states of these organizations.

However, in addition to the strategic aim of building a hegemony, the actual policy-making context is significantly conditioned by Russia's domestic logic of a LAO. That logic creates a parallel 'framework' of incentives for domestic actors, which does not always contribute to the realization of Russia's identity and geopolitical aspirations. Although the majority of relevant foreign policy actors share the notion of Russia's status as a Great Power, their personal aim of increasing rents and a mentality of short-term planning significantly complicates the general pursuit of the foreign policy goal of preserving a hegemonic status in the post-Soviet space. Reliance on informal relations, competition with other actors, and the prevalent zero-sum thinking makes Russian foreign policy incoherent and unpredictable, since the achievement of both strategic and individual short-term goals are pursued at the same time.

A full spectre of instruments, available to diverse formal and informal actors – ranging from conditionality, assistance, enforcement, socialization and a direct application of military force – further increases the opacity of Russian foreign policy. The complexity of possible explanatory causes to one or another act is an advantage to Russia as it increases unexpectedness of Russian behaviour. On the other hand, it breeds distrust and alienation. Nevertheless, the heterogeneity of goals and the unscrupulous application of tools gives Russia a much stronger hand in comparison to those external actors who pursue a limited number of goals and have self-restrictions regarding the measures applied in pursuit of those goals.

However, the application of these instruments has double-edged consequences. This is best illustrated with regard to Ukraine. On the one hand, Russia's application of military force allowed it to annex Crimea and prevent Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU and NATO. On the other hand, the use of military force against Ukraine contributed to an unprecedented disruption of ties with a 'brotherly Slavic nation' and the 'loss' of Ukraine as a partner in the longer-term integration processes. Another consequence was a profound alienation of the Ukrainian society from a partnership with Russia (Kortunov et al. 2017: 19). Similarly, and even more perplexingly, Russian policies of regional integration go hand in hand with the application of discriminatory and restricting measures against the very countries, which Russia is trying to integrate into a customs, an economic or even a political union (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017). This puzzling inconsistency is discernible even *vis-à-vis* the most loyal post-Soviet states, as evidenced by trade disputes and embargoes in relations with Belarus in 2015-2017 (Astapenia and Balkunets 2016). As a result, Russia's use of coercive pressure has made neighbouring countries more determined to pursue their pro-Western orientation rather than obeying Russian demands (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015). These tendencies, in turn, find a reflection in the Russian analytical discourse, which encourages focusing on strengthening the depoliticized economic foundation of unification around Russia, instead of increasing political and security tensions (Kortunov et al. 2017: 20).

Overall, Russia's foreign policy has been dysfunctional: "in place of a serious strategic thinking (let alone imagination), the Kremlin has allowed itself to be distracted by tactical 'triumphs' and a large measure of self-delusion" (Lo 2015: 66). Nowhere this becomes more visible than in the post-Soviet space, despite – or rather precisely because of – its importance for Russia. Indeed, if anything, the dysfunctionality of Russian foreign policy-making is amplified in the post-Soviet space. As our analysis demonstrated, a wide variety of actors, differing incentive frames, and the erratic use of multiple instruments results in an inconsistent and incoherent policy *vis-à-vis* the neighbouring states.

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## **The EU and Eastern Partnership Countries An Inside-Out Analysis and Strategic Assessment**

Against the background of the war in Ukraine and the rising tensions with Russia, a reassessment of the European Neighborhood Policy has become both more urgent and more challenging. Adopting an inside-out perspective on the challenges of transformation the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries and the European Union face, the research project EU-STRAT seeks to understand varieties of social orders in EaP countries and to explain the propensity of domestic actors to engage in change. EU-STRAT also investigates how bilateral, regional and global interdependencies shape domestic actors' preferences and scope of action. Featuring an eleven-partner consortium of academic, policy, and management excellence, EU-STRAT creates new and strengthens existing links within and between the academic and the policy world on matters relating to current and future relations with EaP countries.

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