



REPORT

RUSSIA'S "ALLIES"

| KALEV STOICESCU |

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Cover page photo: Heads of state of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) pose for a family photo during a meeting in Minsk, Belarus, on 30 November 2017 (by Vasily Fedosenko / Reuters).

Photo on page V: Ravens flying over the Belarus national flag and emblem installed over Prime Minister's building in Minsk (by Vasily Fedosenko / Reuters).

Photo on page 40: A policeman carries national flag as he helps to arrange a polling station in a village of Targap some 100 km outside Almaty, on April 1, 2011 (AFP photo / Vyacheslav Oseledko).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The West has largely neglected Russia’s “allies”, members of the CSTO and the EAEU, in comparison to “dissident” Ukraine and Georgia.¹ These countries are not “lost”, as they actually seek to strengthen their sovereignty, as much as possible, avoid international isolation, and gain Western recognition and benefits through cooperation.
- Russia’s irritation does not mean that the West has no right to or interest in developing relations with the Kremlin’s “allies”, just as Russia has bilateral relations with all NATO/EU member states. Transparent and friendly relations between the West and the “allies” offer no solid basis for Russian allegations of provoking unnecessary conflicts of interest.
- The “allies” have joined the EAEU and CSTO mainly for economic and, in Armenia’s case, security reasons. Belarus and Armenia do not seek EU and/or NATO membership, while the West has no intention of inducing them to switch alliances.
- The West has to make the rules and aims of the game clear by employing effective dialogue with the “allies”, and strategic communication. Inter alia, Western support for building civil societies and carrying out necessary reforms is the only way to modernisation and prosperity for the “allies”.
- The EU has, since 2009, developed the Eastern Partnership (EaP), which includes Belarus and Armenia, and has adopted a Strategy for Central Asia that covers Kazakhstan and its southern neighbours. The Union agreed 20 major goals for 2020 with the EaP partners, and seeks to develop a new strategy for Central Asia.
- NATO and its member states have developed rather modest relations with Russia’s “allies”, which differ from country to country. Armenia has participated in NATO-led operations (KFOR and ISAF) and Kazakhstan is developing a US/UK-sponsored peacekeeping battalion, but Belarus has yet to engage in practical cooperation with the Alliance.
- Russia has been putting visibly more pressure on its “allies” since 2013, as it seeks uncontested dominance in the post-Soviet space.² In anticipation of president Putin’s re-election, the Kremlin is willing to “straighten out” relations with “allies”, especially Belarus. This is yet another reason to support their quest for sovereignty and, in the case of Belarus and Kazakhstan, a new national identity.
- The West can and should do more to support those so-called “allies of Russia”, not just as a moral duty; Europe’s security interests are at stake. Friendly neighbours, which could be more like us, members of the EU, are useful.

The West can and should do more to support those so-called “allies of Russia”, not just as a moral duty; Europe’s security interests are at stake. Friendly neighbours, which could be more like us, members of the EU, are useful.

¹ In the context of the present report, the West means the EU, NATO, and their member states. The term Russia’s “allies” is applied to Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan, which are the main subjects of this report, as well as Kyrgyzstan. The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) was established in May 1992, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was established in May 2014.

² This does not include the Baltic states, which were illegally occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial
CEPA	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CST	Collective Security Treaty
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IPP	Individual Partnership Programme
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
KAF	Kazakhstan Armed Forces
KAZBAT	Kazakh Battalion
KFOR	Kosovo Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OBOR	One Belt One Road
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PARP	Planning and Review Process
RADS	Regional Air Defence System
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
UN	United Nations
WMD	Western Military District



РЭСПУБЛІКА
БЕЛАРУСЬ

INTRODUCTION

Russia is determined to dominate unchallenged in the post-Soviet space. For this purpose, and in order to prevent the “defection” of potential “escapees” or even “contamination” from “coloured revolutions”, Russia exerts on the respective eleven countries its soft and—eventually – hard power, including by means of sustaining old “frozen conflicts” and creating new ones, waging wars of aggression, and invading and occupying portions of their territory.³

Each of the eleven nations has its own geographic and geopolitical, ethnic and cultural, as well as economic and political specificities, and Russia primarily addresses them bilaterally. In addition, the Kremlin created the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in order to bolster – or at least give the impression of – military, political and economic integration.

Russia uses any available means against potential “escapees”, like Ukraine and Georgia, and to a certain extent Moldova, as well as occasional “dissidents”, like Kyrgyzstan.⁴ These countries have inevitably attracted the interest of Western nations and organisations, as well as the media, in their struggle for political freedom and desire to follow a path towards Western democracy and prosperity.

On the other hand, Russia has an inner circle of its closest “allies”, which are vital for the Kremlin’s foreign and domestic interests, but

³ The eleven countries referred to are Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova in Eastern Europe, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan in the Southern Caucasus, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in Central Asia. “Frozen conflicts” is the term applied to Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (which Russia has recognised as “independent states”) in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, and the “People’s Republics” of Lugansk and Donetsk in Ukraine’s Donbass region. The cases of hard power use include against Georgia in August 2008 and against Ukraine in 2014-present. The occupied territory is Ukraine’s Crimea, annexed in March 2014.

⁴ The “Tulip Revolution” in 2005, and the “Second Kyrgyz Revolution” in 2010.

have been largely neglected by the West. These crucial “allies” play the role of Russian political and military outposts and strongholds in three strategic directions – Belarus in the west, Armenia in the south, and Kazakhstan in the south-east/Central Asia.

This report explores Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan. These countries, especially Belarus and Kazakhstan, are still caught in the Soviet legacy that Russia glorifies and reinvigorates. Nevertheless, Russia’s “allies” have the right to strengthen their sovereignty, and the West has the moral duty, and security-related interests, to help them distance themselves from this legacy.

First, the importance of the “allies” to Russia is studied, as well as Russia’s relevance to them. Second, an analysis is made of Russia’s actual influence and leverage in these countries. No less important is the ability and willingness of Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan to counteract, for their own sake, Russia’s pressure, including by developing ties with the West and other countries (particularly China). Finally, following the study of each of the three countries, some conclusions are drawn and some recommendations made, concerning a desirable and realistic future approach by the West, particularly the European Union, towards Russia’s “allies”.

The report is based on multiple open sources of information, as well as discussions held with non-governmental and foreign representatives in Minsk, Yerevan and Astana in 2017.

1. THE RELEVANCE OF BELARUS, ARMENIA AND KAZAKHSTAN TO RUSSIA

Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan are vital to Russia’s geopolitical interests, especially regarding integration in the post-Soviet space, through bilateral ties and in the context of the CSTO and EAEU. On the other hand, the geography of the three “allies” is crucial for Russia’s power projection towards Europe, Turkey and Iran, as well as China and India.

The importance of the “allies” for the Kremlin is primarily political, military and cultural. The economic dimension – in terms of Russia’s

expectations of gaining profit – is far less relevant, with the notable exception of Kazakhstan.

The “allies”, particularly Belarus and Kazakhstan – which border Russia, contain sizeable Russian minorities and have rather weak national identities – form the core of the lost empire. In 2013, the idea that Russia would wage an undeclared war against Ukraine and Kyiv would turn its back on Moscow was unthinkable to most ordinary Russians, but the potential loss of or conflict with any Russian “ally” would be beyond their wildest fantasies.

1.1 POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Russia needs allies, like virtually any other country. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War resulted in the loss of the vast majority of Moscow’s previous foreign allies, whether client or occupied states, especially in Europe, including the Baltic states. Subsequently, the CIS and the CST could not pull together the 12 former Soviet republics into a single coherent political, economic and military space, governed from Moscow. The “allies” remained within the boundaries of loyalty to the Kremlin, but some other “newly independent states”, notably Ukraine and Georgia, started to “defect”.⁵

Consequently, Russia now has a chronic shortage of allies, even among post-Soviet states, and it needs support from its CSTO/EAEU “allies” more than ever before. The Kremlin expects them to align themselves to Russian policy on key issues related to integration and Russian-Western relations.⁶ The “allies” can only be subservient to Russia – neutrality is not an acceptable option, according to Moscow’s well-known terms.⁷ Nevertheless, none of the “allies”

⁵ CST, the “Collective Security Treaty” concluded on 15 May 1992, was predecessor of the CSTO.

⁶ For example, China can be hardly regarded as Russia’s ally. The “strategic partnership” between Russia and China does not entail mutual solidarity and assistance anywhere close to the provisions that govern NATO and the EU, in spite of the close political, economic and military ties between the two countries. Russia therefore cannot count on China’s support in the event of conflict with a third party, including NATO. Similar general rationales apply to other countries that cooperate with Russia for whatever purpose, e.g. Iran.

⁷ A good example is the current policy of Belarus, which often claims “neutrality” by forging good relations with both Russia and the West.

has officially recognised the occupation and annexation of Crimea, or the “independence” of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Kremlin also wants the “allies” to participate in Russia’s rituals of pride and power, and pay political tribute to their master. However, only the die-hard pro-Russian president of Moldova, Igor Dodon, was standing behind President Vladimir Putin during the 9 May 2017 Victory Parade in Moscow.⁸ Presidents Lukashenko, Nazarbayev and Sargsyan were notable by their absence from Red Square.

The Kremlin is increasingly paranoid about Western “plans” to provoke instability and topple president Putin’s regime. Thus, Moscow pretends to defend its “allies” against “coloured revolutions”, which might also “infect” Russia.

The Kremlin is increasingly paranoid about Western “plans” to provoke instability and topple president Putin’s regime. Thus, Moscow pretends to defend its “allies” against “coloured revolutions”, which might also “infect” Russia. The “allies” have to play the role of cordon sanitaire, and remain stable, even if that may result in political and economic stagnation. This rationale could explain Putin’s seemingly adamant patience with regard to Lukashenko, particularly after Viktor Yanukovich fled from Ukraine and Russia failed to regain control over the central government in Kyiv. The CSTO has become, in these circumstances, the gendarme of the “allies”, like the Warsaw Pact in “the good old days”.

Ideally, Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan should become the best examples of successful integration, and encourage other post-Soviet republics to join and enjoy the benefits of the CSTO and EAEU, in exchange for their loyalty to Moscow. On the other hand, the Kremlin promotes integration by denying plans to recreate the Soviet Union. That would be impossible in its Cold War form, but the

⁸ “Moldovan President Igor Dodon attended the 9 May Victory Parade in Moscow,” *moldova.org*, May 9, 2017, <http://www.moldova.org/en/moldova-president-igor-dodon-attended-9-may-victory-parade-moscow-russia/> (accessed June 10, 2017).

Kremlin cannot deny Russia's active policy aimed at preventing all the other eleven former Soviet republics from changing their political orientation and effectively escaping Moscow's orbit. In essence, Russia makes huge efforts

and institutions, albeit in its own way, which resembles the Soviet past.

1.3 MILITARY CONSIDERATIONS

NATO and the EU have repeatedly enlarged at Russia's "expense", and both organisations keep their doors open despite the Kremlin's efforts to shut them, even in the Western Balkans.

to induce its former vassals to stick together around Moscow, and thus resist both the temptations to break free and the influence of the "decadent" West and rising China.

1.2 INSTITUTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Russian political and military leadership is obsessed with and deeply resents the continued existence and successful transformation of NATO, which did not vanish like the Warsaw Pact after the end of the Cold War. The Kremlin is equally irritated by the European Union, which has imposed sanctions on Russia since 2014, a rather unexpected development for Moscow. In addition, NATO and the EU have repeatedly enlarged at Russia's "expense", and both organisations keep their doors open despite the Kremlin's efforts to shut them, even in the Western Balkans.

The Kremlin therefore decided to "mirror" NATO and the EU by fostering its existing alliances and establishing new ones, in which Russia, Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan are supposed to constitute a monolithic platform. However, Russia has no historical experience of democracy and no intention to build up military or political and economic alliances in which the other members are anything more than Moscow's plain vassals. In addition, one cannot avoid noticing the striking mimicry in the respective English-language acronyms – CSTO/NATO and EAEU/EU – just as the clinically dead CIS makes a direct allusion to the Commonwealth made up of former British colonies. Russia pretends to "mirror" Western democratic processes

Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan (together with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) play the role of Russia's military outposts, just like Russia's own re-militarised rim of the Arctic Ocean, Kaliningrad Oblast, Crimea and the Kuril Islands, in their respective strategic directions. They are all bastions that surround the Vauban-type Fortress Russia. Armenia, separated from Russia by Georgia and Azerbaijan, hosts a Russian military base on its territory, in addition to FSB-subordinated Russian border guards on the country's borders with Turkey and Iran.⁹ These forces stand ready to defend Moscow's "ally" against its two arch-enemies, and are therefore not considered by the local ruling elite, and the population, as occupiers. The

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same logic of a permanent presence of Russian forces applies to non-contiguous Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but not to Russia's immediate neighbours, Belarus and Kazakhstan, which host only Russian military assets that are related specifically to air/missile defence and space programmes.¹⁰

The establishment of new Russian military bases in Belarus and Kazakhstan is (geo) politically sensitive. On the other hand, Russia has repeatedly rehearsed, in regular exercises such as *Zapad* ("West") and *Tsentr* ("Centre"), the deployment of large military contingents to these countries, which does not require transit through third states or airlift. Ironically, the Baltic states and Poland, as well as Romania

⁹ The 102nd Military Base of the Group of Russian Forces in Transcaucasia, which is located in the city of Gyumri.

¹⁰ In addition to Russia's interest in squeezing and keeping out US and other Western military presence in Central Asia.

and Bulgaria, had to work hard for NATO allied troops to be deployed to their territory, but Russia's "ally" to the west, Belarus, continues to resist Moscow's pressure to deploy Russian air – and possibly ground and missile – forces to its territory. There is no doubt that Russia counts on making full use of the territory of "allies" in the event of conflict with other powers. The territory of the "allies" is what matters, because the size of their armed forces has little importance for Russia, apart from some specialised formations (especially Spetsnaz and air assault forces).

Ironically, the Baltic states and Poland, as well as Romania and Bulgaria, had to work hard for NATO allied troops to be deployed to their territory, but Russia's "ally" to the west, Belarus, continues to resist Moscow's pressure to deploy Russian air – and possibly ground and missile – forces to its territory.

Arms sales by Russia to its "allies", largely at Russian domestic prices, is not about the fierce competition on the world's defence/armaments market. It is about military integration, which keeps the "allies" away from NATO, and eventually indebted to Russia. The "allies" remain tied to Russia for decades through the maintenance and modernisation, as well as operational services of Russian-made armaments systems and equipment.

1.4 ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

Russia makes great efforts to integrate Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan tightly into the framework of the EAEU, including the Customs Union, thus keeping them dependent on the common market, and imposes certain restrictions on their foreign trade. Russia understands all too well that the economic dimension cannot be underestimated, in terms of the expectations of the "allies".

On the other hand, Belarus and Armenia are a net burden for Russia, as it has to provide them

with hydrocarbons at lower prices than required from any other customers. The renegotiation of prices for oil and gas, including transit tariffs, has repeatedly provoked political crises in Russia's relations with the "allies", particularly Belarus, as well as their quest for alternative sources of supply (e.g. Iranian gas to Armenia, and even Belarus). Russia's preferred option to obtain compensation from its "allies" for the sale of cheaper hydrocarbons (and arms) is to obtain in exchange viable and profitable local enterprises (through joint ventures or takeovers) or to acquire the local network of energy distribution and sale.

Kazakhstan, a country very rich in oil, natural gas and minerals such as uranium, holds a different position, and obviously needs no subsidies from the Kremlin. Russia has to compete with Western and Chinese corporations in the exploitation of Kazakh oil and gas fields, but it continues to control the country's oil export routes through the North Caspian pipeline. On the other hand, Russia fears losing control over

Kazakh gas exports through the Trans-Caspian pipeline.¹¹

In addition to Soviet-era infrastructure, new energy export routes are being opened, such as Russian gas pipelines to China via Kazakhstan. China plans to launch its major One Belt One Road (OBOR) transit project, which involves both Kazakhstan and Belarus. OBOR will test the Sino-Russian partnership, while Russia has yet to figure out its role vis-à-vis the megaproject.¹²

Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the subsequent revival of Ukrainian nationalism have also provoked instinctive reactions in Belarus and Kazakhstan, which seek, at the official level, to promote their own national languages and cultures.

¹¹ The Trans-Caspian pipeline is supposed to deliver natural gas from Kazakhstan (Tengiz Field) through Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan, and further through Georgia and Turkey to Europe.

¹² Pete Baumgartner, "China's Massive 'One Road' Project Largely Bypasses Russia, But Moscow Still On Board," *RFE/RL*, June 26, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-china-one-belt-one-road-project-putin-xi/28579849.html> (accessed July 2, 2017).

1.5 OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Russia is extremely interested in the preservation of the former role of the Russian language and Russian culture, primarily in Belarus and Kazakhstan, but also in Armenia. However, Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the subsequent revival of Ukrainian nationalism have also provoked instinctive reactions in Belarus and Kazakhstan, which seek, at the official level, to promote their own national languages and cultures. Armenia, an ethnically homogeneous and ancient civilisation, is in a different position, which makes it more difficult for Russia to compete there with the local language and culture, as well as the English language and Western influence, especially in relation to the younger generations.

Russia is determined to impose its own values on its "allies", through political and economic means, propaganda, the education of future elites, and human contacts.

Nevertheless, Russia's propaganda TV channels, which are the main building blocks of the common information space sought by Moscow, are watched daily by a vast majority of the populations in the "allied" countries, including Armenia. In addition, the "allies", particularly Belarus and Kazakhstan, share with Russia a strong Soviet heritage. There are millions of Belarusians, Kazakhs and Armenians living in Russia, including as migrant workers. There are also millions of Russians living in Belarus and Kazakhstan, particularly in border areas, whom Russia treats as "compatriots". These border areas, which are heavily populated by ethnic Russians, are essentially "connection zones" that could be used by Moscow, in a worst-case scenario, in a similar fashion to the "people's republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Russia is determined to impose its own values on its "allies", through political and economic means, propaganda, the education of future elites, and human contacts. This is essential because, from the Kremlin's point of view, post-Soviet integration, including in the framework of the CSTO and EAEU, cannot be based on Western values, but only on Russian "traditional values".

2. RUSSIA'S LEVERAGES

Russia's central leverage for ensuring sufficient – if not total – control over Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan is the exploitation of their specific geopolitical and historical context. The Kremlin makes every effort to turn its own strategic interests into the interests of the political leaders and elites in Minsk, Yerevan and Astana by offering them (or pretending to offer) political stability, energy security and defence against perceived foreign and domestic enemies.

2.1 PROTECTOR AGAINST FOREIGN ENEMIES

NATO is presented by Russia – rather obviously in the scenario played out in the *Zapad 2017* military exercise – as the enemy, i.e. the real and only threat to president Lukashenko's regime, and the security and territorial integrity of Belarus.¹³ Armenia's arch-enemy, Turkey, is now once again being embraced by Russia, but Moscow makes no effort to encourage and support reconciliation.

Quite to the contrary, the Kremlin helps to exacerbate relations between the two nations.¹⁴ In addition, the Kremlin uses the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh as the main tool for keeping Armenia in Russia's orbit.¹⁵ Kazakhstan has to fear Islamic fundamentalism spreading from Afghanistan (while Russia actually supports the Taliban¹⁶) and the looming "threat" of Chinese economic expansion.¹⁷

¹³ Mathieu Boulègue, "Five Things to Know About the Zapad-2017 Military Exercise," *Chatham House*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/five-things-know-about-zapad-2017-military-exercise> (accessed September 30, 2017).

¹⁴ Edmond Y. Azadian, "Russia and Turkey Squeeze Armenia," *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator*, August 24, 2017, <https://mirrorspectator.com/2017/08/24/russia-and-turkey-squeeze-armenia/> (accessed August 28, 2017).

¹⁵ Olesya Vartanyan and Magdalena Grono, "Armenia and Azerbaijan's collision course over Nagorno-Karabakh," *Open Democracy*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/olesya-vartanyan-magdalena-grono/armenia-and-azerbaijan-collision-course-over-nagorno-karabakh/> (accessed July 25, 2017).

¹⁶ Samuel Ramani, "Understanding the Russia-Taliban Connection," *The Diplomat*, August 4, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/understanding-the-russia-taliban-connection/> (accessed August 19, 2017).

¹⁷ Anuar Algamanbetov and Bakhytzhon Kurmanov, "China challenges Russian influence in Kazakhstan," *East Asia Forum*, February 28, 2015, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2015/02/28/china-challenges-russian-influence-in-kazakhstan/> (accessed September 2, 2017).

The Kremlin has established bilateral joint air-defence frameworks with Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan.¹⁸ It supplies them with more advanced weapon systems, which increases their military and economic dependence on Russia, and severely limits their potential to disobey Moscow.¹⁹ In addition, the Russian-controlled CSTO, just like the former Warsaw Pact, is supposed to be the guardian of the limited sovereignty of Moscow's vassals, which defends them against "coloured revolutions".²⁰ Large-scale bilateral and CSTO military exercises, often bearing political slogan-like names such as "Combat Brotherhood" and "Invincible Brotherhood", have grown in size and frequency.²¹

The armed forces of the "allies" are not only modelled and equipped Russian-style, but almost certainly are also penetrated by the Russian special services up to the top ranks. Ukraine's experience in 2014 leaves no serious doubts that Russia must have, and should be able to manipulate, loyal or dual-loyalty high-ranking political and military leaders in order to exert its influence in normal conditions, and take control of the situation in times of crisis.

2.2 ENERGY SUPPLIER AND SOURCE OF REMITTANCES

Belarus and Armenia are particularly hungry for cheaper Russian gas and oil, which keep their small and outdated economies running, instead of making economic reforms, boosting entrepreneurship and attracting foreign investment. Belarus has experienced

repeated political crises with Russia, over oil and gas prices, transit tariffs for oil exports and the export routes of products refined from Russian oil. However, Minsk seems to have no other viable alternatives. The recent flirting by Belarus with Iran helped to achieve a new deal with Russia, but – as expected, due to logistical difficulties and the high cost of transportation – did not result in a reliable prospect for broadening sources of supply, i.e. to even modestly endanger Russia's monopoly of gas and oil supply.²² In principle, Armenia could opt for significantly more Iranian gas in order to balance its supply, but it faces pressure from Russia bordering on blackmail, and remains largely enslaved by Gazprom.²³ Iran – to which Russia (and China) has offered full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and which plays an important role in Middle Eastern affairs, including the Syria crisis – is (besides Kazakhstan) in principle the only alternative supplier of hydrocarbons for Armenia that might be politically acceptable to Moscow.

Kremlin uses oil and gas, as well as the distribution networks of pipelines, including export transit to third countries, in order to keep Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan like flies entangled in a spider's web.

Kazakhstan is very rich in oil and gas, but has only recently begun to modernise its oil refineries in order not to import fuel from Russia.²⁴ Virtually all oil exports from Kazakhstan pass through the Russian pipeline network, and an important pipeline for Russian oil exports to China passes through Kazakhstan.²⁵ On the other hand, the Kremlin makes every effort to

¹⁸ Russia's bilateral treaties with the "allies" on joint air defence were signed in 2013, when the Kremlin was determined to accelerate post-Soviet integration in the military, political and economic spheres, including preparations for the establishment of the EAEU, and Moscow's demands – including to Ukraine – to give up association agreements with the EU, which led to the Maidan movement and related events.

¹⁹ Syranush Gazanchyan, "Russia to supply Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan with advanced copters, air defence systems in 2017," *Public Radio of Armenia*, May 22, 2017, <http://www.armradio.am/en/2017/05/22/russia-to-supply-belarus-armenia-and-kazakhstan-with-advanced-copters-air-defense-systems-in-2017/> (accessed June 13, 2017).

²⁰ Alexander Cooley, "Whose Rules, Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in the Post-Soviet States," *Carnegie Endowment*, June 30, 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/06/30/whose-rules-whose-sphere-russian-governance-and-influence-in-post-soviet-states-pub-71403> (accessed July 10, 2017).

²¹ "Belarusian Troops to Participate in Exercise Vzaimodeistviye 2017," Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus, October 5, 2017, accessed October 17, 2017, <http://www.mil.by/en/news/68572/>.

²² Siarhei Bohdan, "Belarus's plan to import Iranian and Azerbaijani oil: how serious is Minsk?," *Belarus Digest*, April 6, 2017, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belaruss-plan-to-import-iranian-and-azerbaijani-oil-how-serious-is-minsk/> (accessed May 12, 2017).

²³ "Armenia Eying Higher Iranian Gas Import," *Financial Tribune*, June 21, 2017, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/energy/66905/armenia-eying-higher-iranian-gas-import> (accessed July 12, 2017).

²⁴ "Shymkent Oil Refinery Modernisation," *Hydrocarbons-Technology*, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://www.hydrocarbons-technology.com/projects/shymkent-oil-refinery-modernisation/>.

²⁵ Arthur Guschin, "China, Russia and the Tussle for Influence in Kazakhstan," *The Diplomat*, March 23, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/03/china-russia-and-the-tussle-for-influence-in-kazakhstan/> (accessed September 19, 2017).

prevent alternative routes, such as the Trans-Caspian pipeline to Azerbaijan.²⁶

The EAEU – which so far has had rather damaging effects on Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan in their trade relations with third countries, especially their neighbours – will have to meet the expectations of net gas consumers (Belarus and Armenia) in terms of an “internal gas market”, but will also need to satisfy the interests of the producers (Russia and Kazakhstan), especially by maintaining their low domestic prices.²⁷

Thus, the Kremlin uses oil and gas (which is not only produced by Russia), as well as the distribution networks of pipelines, including export transit to third countries, in order to keep Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan like flies entangled in a spider’s web. For Russia, this is not strictly about business or making money – which is, however, the only reason for investments and operations in Kazakhstan by Western energy corporations. Hydrocarbons are an essential geopolitical tool, which allows the Kremlin to exert control over its key “allies”.

Remittances from expatriates working in Russia are particularly relevant in the case of Armenia, where – according to some estimates – they could account for up to 20% of the country’s GDP.²⁸ The number of Belarusian and Kazakh migrant workers in Russia is far lower – relative to their population – than in the case of Armenia, but it is nevertheless important, particularly in border regions, i.e. eastern Belarus and northern Kazakhstan, which are also heavily populated by ethnic Russians.²⁹ The present migration trends have their roots in the old Soviet migration policy, while one must also take account of the

²⁶ Robert M. Cutler, “Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan plan an under-sea trans-Caspian oil pipeline,” *The Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, November 7, 2016, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13407-kazakhstan-and-azerbaijan-plan-an-undersea-trans-caspian-oil-pipeline.html> (accessed September 10, 2017).

²⁷ Arshaluys Mgedesjan, “EAEU’s common gas market will benefit both Belarus and Armenia: interview,” *EurAsia Daily*, April 28, 2017, <https://eadaily.com/en/news/2017/04/28/aeaus-common-gas-market-will-benefit-both-belarus-and-armenia-interview> (accessed May 27, 2017).

²⁸ Emil Danielyan, “Migrant Remittances to Armenia rebound in 2017,” *Azattyun*, September 9, 2017, <https://www.azattyun.am/a/28476831.html>, (accessed October 14, 2017).

²⁹ The population of Armenia is three million, while at least 1.5 million Armenians are migrant workers in Russia.

large number of Russian citizens who were born in Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan.³⁰

Russia may eventually use these migrant workers as a bargaining chip, threatening to expel the illegal ones or – in addition to regular police harassment raids – reduce the rights of the legal ones. On the other hand, migrant workers also serve as an excellent platform for consolidating Russia’s image and influence among “allies” as a more prosperous country, which contributes to the well-being of the “allies” poor. However, the latter considerations depend directly on Russia’s economic performance, which has been in considerable decline since 2013, and the views adopted by Russia’s indigenous populations concerning migrant workers, which are often negative.³¹

Nazarbayev acts far more cautiously and skilfully than the outspoken Lukashenko, but actually both autocratic leaders and their countries seek to avoid Russia’s asphyxiating “affection” and the implicit trend towards isolation from the rest of the world.

2.3 GUARANTOR OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL STABILITY

Russia’s relations with many countries are highly personalised, especially in the case of autocratic states ruled by long-standing strongman figures. This applies particularly to the relationship between President Vladimir Putin and the Belarusian president, Alexander Lukashenko, as well as President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan. However, these personal relationships, as well as post-Soviet integration in general, are considerably more difficult than the Kremlin assumed or officially pretends to be the case.³² Nazarbayev acts

³⁰ Olga Chudinovskikh and Mikhail Denisenko, “Russia. A Migration System with Soviet Roots,” *Migration Policy Institute*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/russia-migration-system-soviet-roots> (accessed July 2, 2017).

³¹ Yekaterina Sinelshikova, “Distinguishing faces: what do Russians think about migrant workers?,” *Russia Beyond*, May 18, 2017, https://www.rbth.com/politics_and_society/2017/05/18/distinguishing-faces-what-do-russians-think-about-migrants_765076 (accessed June 12, 2017).

³² Artyom Shraibman, “The Far-Reaching Consequences of Belarus’s Conflict with Russia,” *Carnegie Moscow*, February 2, 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=67939> (accessed March 15, 2017).

far more cautiously and skilfully than the outspoken Lukashenko, but actually both autocratic leaders and their countries seek to avoid Russia's asphyxiating "affection" and the implicit trend towards isolation from the rest of the world.³³

The current top political leaders of the "allies" have strong Russian/Soviet connections and backgrounds, but in 10–15 years' time, if not sooner, a new generation of leaders should emerge – as it will in Russia.

Armenia is different, in the sense that its political system is not built, as in Belarus and Kazakhstan, on the personality cult of the head of state, who makes all the important decisions. Armenia's president, Serzh Sargsyan, is the third head of state since the country's independence, and has contemplated an increasingly parliamentary system, bearing in mind the possibility that he might have to switch to the post of chief executive/prime minister. However, Armenia's executive branch is currently headed by a prime minister (Karen Karapetyan, in office since September 2016) with very strong connections to Russia, having been a long-time CEO of ArmRosGazprom, a subsidiary of Gazprom in Armenia.³⁴

The CSTO is constructed and works in a very similar way to the defunct Warsaw Pact.

The current top political leaders of the "allies" have strong Russian/Soviet connections and backgrounds, but in 10–15 years' time, if not sooner, a new generation of leaders should emerge – as it will in Russia.

³³ Malika Orazgaliyeva, "Nazarbayev, Putin note potential for expanding ties during Almaty meeting," *The Astana Times*, February 28, 2017, <https://astanatimes.com/2017/02/nazarbayev-putin-note-potential-for-expanding-ties-during-almaty-meeting/> (accessed April 3, 2017).

³⁴ "Gazprom Armenia, Management," Gazprom Armenia, accessed September 12, 2017, <http://www.gazprom.com/about/subsidiaries/list-items/669172/>.

3. THE MULTILAYERED WEB OF "INTEGRATION"

President Putin has stated that it is not Russia's goal to re-create the Soviet Union.³⁵ That seems, indeed, to be almost an impossibility, in the sense of reuniting even Belarus and Kazakhstan, and perhaps some other post-Soviet countries (e.g. Kyrgyzstan), into a single centralised or federal state. Even the Union State of Russia and Belarus continues to be, and will most probably remain, largely a fiction.³⁶ However, the consolidation of a multilayered institutional web under Moscow's control, in addition to unequal bilateral relationships, is perfectly achievable, and that is precisely Russia's strategic aim. This web includes, most notably, the CSTO and EAEU, as well as the CIS and the Union State of Russia and Belarus. One may argue that these organisations actually do not work, have only symbolic importance and cannot replace or be more effective than bilateral relations, but they do exist, and Russia spares no effort in using them as strategic tools of integration.³⁷

The CSTO is Russia's response to NATO's continued existence and enlargement since the end of the Cold War. However, it is constructed and works in a very similar way to the defunct Warsaw Pact. Collective defence against foreign "enemies" is actually – once again – of secondary importance, because the "enemies" present political and economic challenges rather than military threats. The main collective task of CSTO members is to suppress – under Russian leadership – any "coloured revolutions", just as during the Prague Spring of 1968.³⁸ Russian leaders have even publicly admitted this task, which is also alluded

³⁵ Allison Quinn, "Vladimir Putin: We don't want the USSR back, but no one believes us," *The Telegraph*, December 21, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/vladimir-putin/12061170/Vladimir-Putin-We-dont-want-the-USSR-back-but-no-one-believes-us.html> (accessed May 15, 2017).

³⁶ Anders Aslund and Andrew Huchins, *The Russia Balance Sheet* (New York: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009), 121.

³⁷ Simonas Klimanskis, "Eurasian Economic Union: reality or fiction?," *Delfi by The Lithuania Tribune*, November 25, 2016, <https://en.delfi.lt/opinion/eurasian-economic-union-reality-or-fiction.d?id=72980044> (accessed April 25, 2017).

³⁸ Joshua Kucera, "CSTO Takes Aim at Ukraine, Coloured Revolutions," *Eurasianet*, December 23, 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67897> (accessed August 7, 2017).

to in the latest Russian foreign policy and military doctrines.³⁹ On this basis, Russia feels entitled to claim full legitimacy for “collective interventions” in CSTO member states.

Russia feels entitled to claim full legitimacy for “collective interventions” in CSTO member states.

The EAEU is to a large extent Russia’s response to the EU’s Eastern Partnership, in order to prevent or make politically and economically ineffective association agreements between the “allies” and the EU. It is, as conceived by the Kremlin’s strategists, far more politically than economically motivated.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the EAEU

Russia aims to promote full economic and political integration in a single trade and economic space, which would allow Moscow to dictate internal EAEU rules and procedures, as well as the terms of the foreign economic policy of each member state.

members, other than Russia, only wish to gain economic benefits from this framework. Russia aims to promote full economic and political integration in a single trade and economic space, which would allow Moscow to dictate internal EAEU rules and procedures, as well as the terms of the foreign economic policy of each member state. Ideally, the EAEU could work, and satisfy all sides, if Russia provided to its “allies” sufficiently cheap hydrocarbons and loans, and did not impose excessive foreign trade barriers or meddle in their internal politics. In other words, the success of the EAEU project depends entirely on Russia’s economic performance, the availability of large financial resources and a willingness to invest in the economies of “allies”, and oil and gas

³⁹ “Putin vows to prevent “color revolutions” for Russia and its Eurasian allies,” *RT*, April 12, 2017, <https://www.rt.com/politics/384451-putin-vows-to-prevent-color/> (accessed May 4, 2017).

⁴⁰ Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczuk, “The Eurasian Economic Union,” *Chatham House*, May 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2017-05-02-eurasian-economic-union-dragneva-wolczuk.pdf> (accessed June 20, 2017).

sold at well below world market prices, as well as Moscow’s readiness not to restrict excessively trade and economic relations between “allies” and third countries. However, the EAEU does not seem to work efficiently, because these preconditions are hardly ever met.⁴¹

The CIS – created in 1992 as the very first ersatz re-embodiment of the defunct Soviet empire – was supposed to become the framework for political, economic and military (including common air defence etc.) integration, which should have consolidated Moscow’s role as the centre of gravity in the post-Soviet space. The CIS has gained observer status at the UN, has its HQ in Minsk and organises meetings, military exercises and many other activities in different formats, but has nevertheless been unsuccessful, and now serves as a rather symbolic platform for engaging potential new members of the CSTO and EAEU. Some Russian observers believe that one reason for the CIS’s lack of success could be that Russia perceived the post-Soviet states increasingly as separate entities, which did not form the centrepiece of the Kremlin’s foreign policy.⁴²

Russia has tried to mimic the European Union, establishing within the EAEU the Eurasian Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Space (an internal market involving all five EAEU member states), in addition to the military muscle of the CSTO, but the forces of disintegration appear to be stronger than those of integration.⁴³

The small cousin is crucial to the Kremlin’s attempts to impose itself in an uncontested manner and demand unconditional loyalty in the post-Soviet space.

⁴¹ Areg Galstyan, “Is the Eurasian Economic Union Slowly Coming Apart?,” *The National Interest*, March 29, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-eurasian-economic-union-slowly-coming-apart-19947> (accessed April 12, 2017).

⁴² Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Relations with the CIS Countries: Outlook for 2020,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, March 28, 2013, <http://carnegie.ru/2013/03/28/russia-s-relations-with-cis-countries-outlook-for-2020-pub-51395> (accessed June 18, 2017).

⁴³ Pavel Koshkin, “Why post-Soviet integration will be a lot harder than the Kremlin thought,” *Russia Direct*, February 9, 2017, <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/why-post-soviet-integration-will-be-lot-harder-kremlin-thought> (accessed March 10, 2017).

4. BELARUS: THE OTHER RUSSIA?

Belarus gained its independence in 1991 by default, very much like the Central Asian states. The populations of these countries, apart from a handful of “nationalists”, did not seek and were not ready for independence, as they had barely surviving national identities and no history of statehood.⁴⁴ This explains, at least in part, the similarity of their paternalistic regimes, relics of the Soviet past, which were until recently rather closed to the West.

Prior to the 1920s, Belarusians spoke mostly Belarusian and called themselves “locals” (*tuteishiya*). By the end of the Soviet era, the vast majority of Belarusians spoke only Russian, but called themselves Belarusians. Soviet power virtually destroyed the Belarusian national identity. That is why Soviet symbols are so hard to replace in that country – there is not much to replace them with, as the historical memory has been largely erased.⁴⁵

Belarus has realised that president Putin stands ready to use force not just against Saakashvili’s Georgia, but also against eastern Slavic ethnic brethren.

Belarus is Russia’s buffer (or what is left of it) in the West, and the indispensable ally. The small cousin is crucial to the Kremlin’s attempts to impose itself in an uncontested manner and demand unconditional loyalty in the post-Soviet space. Ideally, Belarus should be the model example of post-Soviet integration, in all spheres, especially given that it constitutes together with Russia the Union State. However, ironically, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was hammered out on 8 December 1991 in Belarus, in a state dacha located in the thick Belavezha forest, just 8 km from the Polish border. In addition, allegedly the only

⁴⁴Vital Silitski, “Explaining post-Communist Authoritarianism in Belarus,” in *Contemporary Belarus: Between Democracy and Dictatorship*, ed. by Elena Korosteleva, Colin Lawson and Rosalind Marsh (London: Routledge, 2003), 39-40.

⁴⁵Yuri Drakakhrust, “Богдан супраць Карбалевіча: што прынесла Беларусі Кастрычніцкая рэвалюцыя?” [Bogdan against Karbalevich: what did October Revolution bring for Belarus?], *Svaboda*, https://www.svaboda.org/a/28836488.html?mc_cid=6436aedb6&mc_eid=37ede26c1f (accessed November 5, 2017).

member of the Belarusian Supreme Soviet (parliament) who voted against the ratification of the Belavezha agreement was Alexander Lukashenko.⁴⁶

Belarus is politically and militarily, as well as psychologically and symbolically, of utmost importance to the Kremlin and ordinary Russians, even though it has been a continuous economic burden and often an irritation for Russia. For the Russians, Belarus is “ours” (theirs), and there can be no other way. The present relationship between Russia and Ukraine – i.e. the *de facto* state of war since 2014 – was inconceivable for ordinary Russians (and most Ukrainians), but a Russian-Belarusian split, of any kind, would be beyond the realms of fantasy.

However, Russia’s undeclared war against Ukraine has resulted in serious impacts on Belarus, too. First, Belarus has realised that president Putin stands ready to use force not just against Saakashvili’s Georgia, but also against eastern Slavic ethnic brethren, who became “fascists” literally overnight. Second, Minsk has not recognised the illegal annexation of Crimea, which became *de facto* – even if not *de jure* – a part of the territory of the Union State. Third, president Lukashenko has promoted relative openness and improvement in relations with Western countries and organisations, including the EU, and has even launched a government-driven revival of the Belarusian language and culture since 2015, in order to emphasise the country’s sovereignty – which inevitably annoyed the Kremlin.

Relations between Russia and Belarus remain strained following *Zapad 2017*, since neither side is willing to meet the other’s demands. Minsk seeks a more balanced and flexible relationship, whereas Moscow cannot accept anything close to an equal partnership, even if that principle is enshrined in the agreements on the establishment of the Union State and the EAEU.⁴⁷ Russia rather deeply resents attempts by Belarus to gain more political and

⁴⁶“Why are Russian attitudes towards Belarus and Ukraine so different?” *Sputnik News*, April 4, 2015, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201504041020477356/> (accessed May 14, 2017).

⁴⁷“Belarus demands equal rights with Russia in the Eurasian Economic Union,” *Belarusian Television Channel CTV*, March 9, 2017, <http://en.ctv.by/en/1489144788-belarus-demands-equal-rights-with-russia-in-eurasian-economic-union> (accessed March 15, 2017).

economic freedom, including by improving its relations with the West and Ukraine.

4.1 MILITARY ASPECTS

The geographic position and territory of Belarus is extremely important to Russia. Belarus is Russia's potential military spearhead against NATO's Eastern Flank, i.e. Poland and the Baltic states, as well as Ukraine. Kyiv is much closer to the Belarusian border than the Russian, while the Belarus-Ukraine border extends hundreds of kilometres to the west of the Dnepr and the Chernobyl "Exclusion Zone".

The territory of Belarus offers Russia the possibility to bring its ground, air and special forces, or even missile forces, much closer to the Kaliningrad Oblast, while keeping them on the territory of the Union State.

The territory of Belarus offers Russia the possibility to bring its ground, air and special forces, or even missile forces, much closer to the Kaliningrad Oblast, while keeping them on the territory of the Union State. Russia has deployed to Kaliningrad Oblast its most advanced A2/AD systems, but the Kremlin is nevertheless nervous, as it acknowledges the vulnerability of the tiny exclave – even if it is armed to the teeth.⁴⁸ The territory of Belarus is, in addition to the Baltic Fleet, therefore crucial in the Russian political and military mindset, and in planning the defence of Kaliningrad Oblast, as the major avenue for the deployment of Russian forces in a crisis.

These considerations are directly reflected in Russia's military exercises, including large-scale "snap"/combat-control exercises. Russia and Belarus jointly conduct major pre-planned military exercises every two years, the alternating *Union Shield* and *Zapad*, although the latter is an integral part of – even if officially separate from – Russia's quadrennial strategic exercise

⁴⁸ Fred Kaplan, "Cold War Theater," *Slate*, May 13, 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/war_stories/2016/05/our_missile_defense_system_in_europe_is_making_russia_nervous_should_it.html (accessed September 11, 2017).

involving the whole Western Military District (WMD), including the Kaliningrad Oblast, and the Baltic and Northern Fleets.⁴⁹ Thus, Russia clearly regards Belarus as a *de facto* extension or part of its WMD. Notwithstanding peacetime arrangements and procedures or bilateral political relations, the Armed Forces of Belarus are expected by Moscow to be totally subordinated to the Russian command in a serious crisis or conflict with the West.

Russia and Belarus jointly operate a common regional air-defence system (RADS) that was established in 2009 and completed in 2016.⁵⁰ The

RADS has its own structure of military and administrative bodies, command-and-control centres and assigned military formations and units, as well as joint procedures for air-defence combat duty, and its official commander is the head of the Belarusian Air Force and Air Defence. Russia has, since 1995, made unsuccessful attempts to recreate the Soviet Union's unified air-defence

model over the entire post-Soviet space, and had to switch to bilateral arrangements, as in the case of Belarus, which it is trying to merge under the CSTO umbrella. These processes give a hint of the stubbornness of the "allies" against subordinating their armed forces entirely or even partially to Russian command, at least in peacetime.⁵¹

Notwithstanding peacetime arrangements and procedures or bilateral political relations, the Armed Forces of Belarus are expected by Moscow to be totally subordinated to the Russian command in a serious crisis or conflict with the West.

In fact, the only permanent Russian military presence in Belarus, for the time being, is at

⁴⁹ Kalev Stoicescu, "Decoding Zapad-2017," *ICDS*, September 4, 2017, <https://www.icds.ee/publications/article/decoding-zapad-2017/> (accessed September 4, 2017).

⁵⁰ "Russia, Belarus complete formation of united air defense system," *TASS – Russian News Agency*, April 6, 2016, <http://tass.com/defense/867811> (accessed August 11, 2017).

⁵¹ Siarhei Bohdan, "Does the single air defence system bring Belarus closer to Russia?," *BelarusDigest*, April 12, 2016, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/does-the-single-air-defence-system-bring-belarus-closer-to-russia/> (accessed August 12, 2017).

Hantsavichy Radar Station and a few other RADS-related sites and structures.⁵² The Kremlin has made repeated attempts, at the highest level, to reach agreement with Belarus on the use by Russia, under Russian jurisdiction, of at least one airbase in Belarus.⁵³ At the same time, from 2013 to 2015, Russia tried to “warm up” Minsk by periodically deploying four fighter aircraft and essentially imitating in Belarusian airspace NATO’s Air Policing mission in the Baltic states.⁵⁴ However, president Lukashenko continued to reject Russia’s demands, offering Belarusian air force pilots for the Russian aircraft, under Belarusian jurisdiction. Ultimately, he asked for and obtained more modern Russian equipment for Belarus, such as Su-30SM fighter aircraft and Tor-M2E surface-to-air missile systems.⁵⁵

Russia was for a long time reluctant to provide Belarus with advanced surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missile systems, such as *Iskander-M* and S-400, but it seems that Moscow has changed its mind.⁵⁶ The Kremlin has apparently abandoned its former plans to deploy such systems to Belarus under Russia’s full control and jurisdiction, which created friction between the two countries at the political level.

These steps, presented by Russia as friendliness and flexibility towards Belarus, are in fact purely pragmatic – advanced Russian equipment, even if belonging to and operated by the Belarusian armed forces, will guard the Union State in the west. In addition, Belarus would be continuously and increasingly tied to Russia, including by the significant debts generated by the arms transfers.

⁵² A *Volga*-type early warning radar, built in 1982 and run by the Russian Aerospace Defence Forces. See “Hantsavichy Radar Station,” Wikipedia, accessed August 13, 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hantsavichy_Radar_Station.

⁵³ The 61st Assault Air Base in Baranavichy, Western Belarus, and possibly the 116th Guards Assault Air Base in Lida, close to the Belarus-Lithuania border.

⁵⁴ Siarhei Bohdan, “Thwarting plans for a Russian airbase, Minsk strengthens its air force,” *Belarus Digest*, October 12, 2017, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/thwarting-plans-for-a-russian-airbase-minsk-strengthens-its-air-force/> (accessed July 17, 2017).

⁵⁵ Siarhei Bohdan, “Moscow Gives Belarus Arms and Seems to Abandon Airbase Plans,” *Belarus Digest*, January 12, 2016, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/moscow-gives-belarus-arms-and-seems-to-abandon-airbase-plans/> (accessed on August 14, 2017).

⁵⁶ “Belarus Plans Future Purchases of Russia’s Missile Systems – Ambassador,” *Sputnik News*, June 26, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201706261054968240-russia-belarus-iskander-purchase/> (accessed August 14, 2017).

Furthermore, Russia certainly expects to take full control over the armed forces of Belarus,⁵⁷ including those weapon systems, in the event of military conflict with NATO or – potentially – even with Ukraine, although the latter calculation could prove more difficult to carry out, as long as Lukashenko remains in power.

4.2 ECONOMIC ASPECTS

Belarus has taken a very slow transition path, and has modestly reorganised its Soviet-era production system, which is still dominated by large state-owned enterprises (particularly machine-building) and massive state-run farms, reminiscent of old *kolkhozes*. Small and medium-sized enterprises, including in agriculture, have no state support or private investment in order to survive successfully.⁵⁸ Energy and trade balances are the two major aspects that deserve a closer look in the bilateral context with Russia.

Practically the entire domestic energy production and consumption of Belarus rely on Russia’s mercy, and world market prices.

Belarus is highly dependent on cheap oil and natural gas imports from Russia. In 2015, it imported 23 million tonnes of crude oil, more than half of which it refined/processed into fuel oil and diesel/gasoline for export.⁵⁹ Belarus imports from Russia virtually all of the natural gas it needs for domestic consumption, of which more than 70% is used to produce electricity and heat, the rest going mainly to the industrial sector and transportation, as well as for residential use.⁶⁰ The “Druzhba” pipeline, which provides 20% of Germany’s oil, as well as important quantities to other Central European countries, passes through Belarus, which earns revenue from transit tariffs.

⁵⁷ Ihor Kabanenko, “Zapad 2017: Lessons Learned by Russia and Implications for NATO,” *Jamestown Foundation*, October 6, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/zapad-2017-lessons-learned-russia-implications-nato/> (accessed October 15, 2017).

⁵⁸ “Belarus Overview,” The World Bank, accessed October 10, 2017, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/belarus/overview>.

⁵⁹ “Belarus: Oil for 2015,” International Energy Agency, accessed October 10, 2017, <https://www.iea.org/statistics/statistics-search/report/?year=2015&country=Belarus&product=Oil>.

⁶⁰ “Belarus: Natural Gas for 2015,” International Energy Agency, accessed October 10, 2017, <https://www.iea.org/statistics/statisticssearch/report/?year=2015&country=Belarus&product=NaturalGas>.

Thus, practically the entire domestic energy production and consumption of Belarus – as well as the profits it earns from exports of refined hydrocarbons, and transit tariffs – rely on Russia’s mercy, and world market prices. There have been repeated energy disputes between the two countries, most notably in 2004 and 2007. Russia temporarily shut down gas and/or oil pipelines in order to force Belarus to accept considerably higher prices and increasing control by Moscow over the energy distribution network in Belarus, which it achieved in November 2011 by taking full control of Beltransgaz.⁶¹ Since 2014, Minsk has sought to demonstrate signs of sovereignty, but nevertheless in 2016 it asked the Kremlin to sell natural gas at the same price as it was provided to Russian oblasts adjacent to Belarus.⁶²

On the electricity front, Belarus plans to start operating a nuclear power plant by 2020 at Astravets (Hrodna region), close to the Lithuanian border (and only 50 km from Vilnius). The 2400-MW plant is built by Russia’s Atomstroyexport and financed by the Russian government.⁶³ Minsk needs the plant to ensure national energy security, according to president Lukashenko, following the energy dispute with Russia in 2007, but it turned out to be yet another Russian hook.⁶⁴ The Russian-built nuclear plant revives fears of the Chernobyl disaster, most notably in Lithuania.⁶⁵ Coupled with another similar plant that Russia planned to build in Kaliningrad Oblast (at Neman, also very close

to the Lithuanian border), which has now been temporarily abandoned, the Belarusian plant is conceived to counter Lithuanian plans to build a nuclear plant at Visaginas, and compete in the EU’s energy market.⁶⁶ However, these Russian projects seem to be very politically motivated, like Nord Stream 2, and have very questionable economic prospects, in addition to environmental and safety concerns.⁶⁷

Belarus also exports domestically made goods, mainly machinery and agricultural products, in addition to fuels refined from Russian oil, in order to balance its foreign trade. However, the Kremlin makes Belarus increasingly economically dependent on trade with Russia. The bilateral trade volume for the first seven months of 2017 grew by 23% compared to the same period in 2016, to a total of 17.68 billion US dollars, while exports from Belarus to Russia grew 24.4% to 7.22 billion dollars. Consequently, the Belarusian trade deficit with Russia also grew in the same period, from 2.78 billion dollars to 3.24 billion. Russia’s share of Belarus’s foreign trade is now around 50%

The EU is the second-largest trading partner, and has the potential to balance Belarusian foreign trade and reduce overdependence on Russia.

(60% of all imports and 45% of exports).⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the EU is the second-largest trading partner, and has the potential to balance Belarusian foreign trade and reduce overdependence on Russia.

Belarus remains deeply entangled in Russia’s energy web, and tries to reduce its debts to Russia by exporting goods to Russia and the markets of other “allies”. On the other hand, president Lukashenko is trying to avoid the fate

⁶¹ “Factbox: Russia’s energy disputes with Ukraine and Belarus,” *Reuters*, December 21, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-gas-disputes/factbox-russias-energy-disputes-with-ukraine-and-belarus-idUSBR8BK11T20121221> (accessed March 12, 2017).

⁶² Andrei Makhovski and Katya Golubkova, “Belarus PM wants same gas price as Russian regions,” *Reuters*, December 20, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-russia-prime-minister/belarus-pm-wants-same-gas-price-as-russian-regions-idUSKBN1490NJ> (accessed August 15, 2017).

⁶³ “Nuclear Power in Belarus,” *World Nuclear*, October 2017, accessed October 10, 2017, <http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-a-f/belarus.aspx>; “Belarus nuclear plant gets Russian credit,” *World Nuclear News*, June 20, 2017, <http://www.world-nuclear-news.org/newsarticle.aspx?id=13548&LangType=2057> (accessed October 10, 2017).

⁶⁴ “Belarus to build nuclear plant,” *BBC*, October 11, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7039403.stm> (accessed October 10, 2017).

⁶⁵ “Russian-built nuclear plant revives Chernobyl fears,” *The Financial Times*, September 18, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/a98322de-96f7-11e7-b83c-9588e51488a0?mhq5j=e7> (accessed September 22, 2017).

⁶⁶ Andrei Ozharovski and Charles Digges, “Lithuania seeks to sever ties with Russian nuclear plants,” *Bellona*, January 11, 2016, <http://bellona.org/news/nuclear-issues/2016-01-lithuania-seeks-to-sever-ties-with-russian-nuclear-plants> (accessed May 10, 2017).

⁶⁷ It seems that Russia’s plans to build a nuclear power plant in Kaliningrad Oblast were suspended and replaced by the construction of a gas-powered plant. “Nuclear Power in Russia,” *World Nuclear Association*, December 2017, accessed December, 2017, <http://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/country-profiles/countries-o-s/russia-nuclear-power.aspx>.

⁶⁸ “Foreign Trade of Belarus in January-September 2017,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, accessed September 12, 2017, http://mfa.gov.by/en/foreign_trade/.

of Armenia, i.e. losing, through “privatisation”, virtually all the country’s main enterprises and valuable infrastructure to Russia, as compensation for debts from energy and arms imports. Nevertheless, the result is likely to be the further economic “integration” of Belarus into the EAEU.

Putin’s method is the outright demonstration of power, Lukashenko’s way is to acquire sufficient resources, mainly from Russia.

4.3 POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Relations between Belarus and Russia bear the heavy imprint of the personal relationship between the two heads of state, presidents Lukashenko and Putin. Both act according to their experience and mentality from the Soviet past, but their backgrounds – *kolkhoz* farming and the secret services, respectively – are very different, and they also seem not to have any personal chemistry. Both wish to consolidate their regimes and keep their countries stable,

The Kremlin seems to be visibly dissatisfied with the bilateral relationship, because Belarus does not meet Russia’s demands for unconditional and total loyalty.

but in rather different ways. Putin’s method is the outright demonstration of power, domestically and beyond Russia’s borders, by all possible means, including propaganda and military might. His language is power. On the other hand, Lukashenko’s way is to acquire sufficient resources, mainly from Russia, in order to keep his antiquated and inefficient social-economic model running. Lukashenko’s language is loyalty/friendship in exchange for resources.

The Kremlin seems to be visibly dissatisfied with the bilateral relationship, because Belarus does not meet Russia’s demands for unconditional and total loyalty. Moscow is very irritated by Minsk’s “inconsistencies” with the Kremlin’s foreign policy, as Belarus attempts to develop independent political and economic ties with its other neighbours, all of whom are Russia’s

adversaries. Relations between Belarus and Ukraine, which Lukashenko continues to call a “brother nation”, in contrast to Russia’s political jargon of “junta” and “fascists”, have had their ups and downs since 2014. Lukashenko attended the inauguration of president Poroshenko in June 2014, and made another short working visit to Kyiv in December 2014, but their contacts were stopped by mounting pressure from Moscow on Minsk. In addition, a planned meeting between the two presidents in late 2016 was cancelled due to opposition by Belarus at the 71st UN General Assembly to a resolution on the human rights situation in Crimea, proposed by Ukraine.⁶⁹ However, presidents Lukashenko and Poroshenko finally met again, in Belarus in April 2017 and in Ukraine three months later.⁷⁰ In a way, it seems strange that Russia’s closest ally and the Kremlin’s biggest enemy in the former Soviet space (or even the world, according to some opinion polls), even if neighbours and Eastern Slavic relatives, are keen to cooperate. The main factors that bring Ukraine and Belarus closer together are Russian-inspired fears. The relationship between the two countries is very complex, but their rapprochement makes sense, because Ukraine is Belarus’s second-largest trading partner and may provide additional business opportunities for Minsk, while Kyiv is interested in continued Belarusian “neutrality” in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. In fact, Lukashenko has sent reassuring signals to Kyiv, also following *Zapad 2017*, that Belarus would not permit any aggressive actions against Ukraine from its territory.⁷¹

The main factors that bring Ukraine and Belarus closer together are Russian-inspired fears.

⁶⁹ Igar Gubarevich, “Belarus on the international stage: a Russian puppet or a skilful diplomat?” *Belarus Digest*, November 24, 2016, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-on-the-international-stage-a-russian-puppet-or-a-skilful-diplomat/> (accessed April 25, 2017).

⁷⁰ Igar Gubarevich, “Belarus and Ukraine cooperate in the face of Russian pressure,” *Belarus Digest*, July 27, 2017, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-and-ukraine-cooperate-in-the-face-of-russian-pressure/> (accessed July 29, 2017).

⁷¹ “President Lukashenko: Belarus won’t fight against anyone if not touched,” *Belarusian CTV*, September 20, 2017, <http://en.ctv.by/en/1505976516-president-lukashenko-belarus-wont-fight-against-anyone-if-not-touched> (accessed September 25, 2017).

Even so, Ukraine is not the most prominent irritant in Russo-Belarusian relations. Relations between Putin and Lukashenko have been constantly disturbed by their regular frictions concerning energy supply and debts, and most recently by the message stemming from *Zapad 2017*. In addition, Belarus is under growing pressure from Russia, in preparation for Putin's bid for re-election in March 2018, in order to make a show of "straightening out relations" with "allies".

Belarus is under growing pressure from Russia, in preparation for Putin's bid for re-election in March 2018, in order to make a show of "straightening out relations" with "allies".

In late August 2017, Belarus was granted 700 million dollars from Russia, but only to refinance Minsk's debts to Moscow, which is hardly a bonus to ensure Lukashenko's loyalty.⁷² At about the same time, Belarus found itself engaged in *Zapad 2017*, thereby becoming involved in Russia's escalatory confrontation and show of force against NATO. Lukashenko subscribed, in March 2017, to the scenario for *Zapad*, which essentially simulated a Russian invasion of Belarus, and an eventual change of regime in Minsk.⁷³ Hence, it came as no surprise that the two presidents observed the exercise separately – for the first time – each in his own country. In addition, on 16 September 2017, a Belarusian journalist, Dzyans Ivashin, published a list of 137 Russian agents of influence operating in Belarus, which included high-ranking Belarusian military personnel.⁷⁴ It is unlikely that the timing – during *Zapad 2017* – was accidental, or that such a list could have been released without Lukashenko's permission. Furthermore, on 13 October 2017, the Belarusian presidential press office made a statement concerning the dismissal of the leadership of the country's top security agency, the Operations and Analysis Centre

⁷² "Russia is to give Belarus USD 700 million to repay debt," *Charter 97*, August 22, 2017, <https://charter97.org/en/news/2017/8/22/260535/> (accessed September 2, 2017).

⁷³ Andrew Wilson, "Is Russia Practicing a Dry Run for the Invasion of Belarus," *Foreign Policy*, September 18, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/18/is-russia-practicing-a-dry-run-for-an-invasion-of-belarus/> (accessed September 20, 2017).

⁷⁴ Konrad Muzyka, "Go West," *IHS Jane's International Defence*, November 1, 2017.

(OAC), which was supervised by the president's eldest son, Viktor.⁷⁵

The post-*Zapad 2017* period of visible mutual discontent resulted in a visit by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov to Minsk on 25 September 2017, but not in substantive contacts between Lukashenko and Putin.⁷⁶ It seems that Kadyrov's visit to Minsk did not produce the results expected by Putin, and the subsequent brief exchange between Lukashenko and Putin in Sochi, on 11 October 2017, prompted Lukashenko to take immediate action in the OAC, as mentioned above. Kadyrov certainly did not go to Minsk on his own initiative or without Putin's authorisation. In fact, it would be fair to assume that he played the role of Putin's specially selected messenger, who presented to Lukashenko the conditions for "straightening out" bilateral relations.

No one other than the Chechen leader could probably have delivered the Kremlin's demands in better terms, which most likely included the permanent deployment of Russian forces to Belarus (in "response" to NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence), and the redirection of Belarusian-refined fuel oils through the Russian railway system to the ports of Ust-Luga and St Petersburg on the Gulf of Finland. In addition, Russia might be interested in "privatising" the Naftan refinery in Polotsk, which exports oil products through the Baltic ports. Thus, Russia's demands are obviously aimed at subduing Minsk, as well as cutting its foreign

Russia's demands are obviously aimed at subduing Minsk, as well as cutting its foreign trade relations and increasing tensions with Belarus's neighbours.

⁷⁵ "Meeting with representatives of power structures," President of Belarus, October 13, 2017, accessed October 15, 2017, http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/soveschanie-17303/; Yanina Sokolovskaya, "Лукашенко: ОАЦ контролирует мой старший сын. И по закону ему подконтрольна верхушка спецслужб" [Lukashenko: My son controls the OAC. The top ranks of special services are subordinated to him according to law], TUT.BY, June 18, 2013, <https://news.tut.by/politics/353683.html> (accessed May 20, 2017).

⁷⁶ On 11 October 2017, president Lukashenko took part in a session of the Eurasian Supreme Economic Council in Sochi, Russia. President Vladimir Putin held several bilateral meetings with heads of states of "allies", but Lukashenko was not among them, and allegedly they only talked in passing.

trade relations and increasing tensions with Belarus's neighbours.

Kadyrov's visit may also have served as additional psychological pressure on Lukashenko, by magnifying his fears of potential Russian invasion or plots by the secret services. Last but not least, Kadyrov reminded Lukashenko – by his own example – that one may not enjoy a state within a state (i.e. limited sovereignty), and Russia's financial favours, without unconditional loyalty and support for the Kremlin's geopolitical games. Belarusian-Russian relations may once again become more difficult, if there is no agreement on the volume of oil exports to Belarus in 2018 (it currently stands at 24 million tonnes), and the acceptance by Belarus of Russia's "integration projects".

Russia's pressure on Belarus, in the context of *Zapad 2017* and thereafter, did not improve Moscow's relations with Minsk – quite the contrary – but it did succeed in significantly weakening the prospects for Belarus to improve relations with the West and Ukraine. Belarus must therefore show consistency in its approach towards the West, in the framework of the EU's Eastern Partnership. The EU must also show greater interest in Belarus, both politically and economically. It has launched cross-border cooperation projects

Belarus plays the role of Russia's "ally" with increasingly visible aversion. Minsk does not wish to engage in or bear the economic costs of Russia's adventurous and perilous geopolitical games and confrontation with the West.

(Poland–Belarus–Ukraine and Latvia–Lithuania–Belarus), but the sums allocated are rather modest (53 million euro between 2007 and 2013).⁷⁷

Belarus plays the role of Russia's "ally" with increasingly visible aversion. Minsk does not wish to engage in or bear the economic costs of Russia's adventurous and perilous geopolitical

⁷⁷ "EU Projects with Belarus," EU Delegation to Belarus, April 12, 2017, accessed May 14, 2017, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/947/eu-projects-belarus_en.

games and confrontation with the West.⁷⁸ On the contrary, it has taken certain steps to improve relations with the EU, including five-day visa-free entry upon arrival through Minsk airport, which prompted Russia's countermeasure of establishing frontier controls on the border with Belarus.⁷⁹ In addition, Belarus aims to strengthen its sovereignty and improve its international image by promoting dialogue between Russia and the West. At the last UN General Assembly, the Belarusian foreign minister proposed a new "Minsk format" for dialogue between Russia and NATO, to which Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov responded by denouncing NATO's "new Cold War". Neither have the Minsk negotiations and agreements so far been productive in helping to resolve the situation in "separatist" Donbass.

Finally, NATO is not a taboo for the "allies" – not even for Belarus, any more.

Finally, NATO is not a taboo for the "allies" – not even for Belarus, any more. NATO has frozen its cooperation with Russia, but not with the "allies", which did not go unnoticed in Minsk, or Yerevan and Astana. In fact, in 2017 Belarus has taken some relatively courageous steps: president Lukashenko met several US congressmen, who were attending the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly in Minsk in July, and invited them to observe *Zapad 2017*, and in December the Belarusian capital hosted a large conference on "International Security and NATO". Thus, relations between Russia's "allies" and NATO can and should be expanded and improved. After all, unlike Russia, Belarus does not see a threat in NATO and its exercises.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Exemplified by the refusal of Belarus to join Russia in adopting counter-sanctions against the West, preferring to profit from the continued re-export of Western food products to Russia.

⁷⁹ "Russia Establishes Security Zone on Belarusian Border," *RFE/RL*, February 1, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-belarus-border-security-zone/28273799.html> (accessed March 1, 2017).

⁸⁰ "NATO drills pose no threat to Minsk – Belarusian Defense Ministry," *TASS*, August 29, 2017, <http://tass.com/defense/962555> (accessed September 1, 2017).

5. ARMENIA: THE PRISONER OF THE CAUCASUS⁸¹

The Kremlin seems to consider Armenia to be a Kaliningrad-like outpost (exclave) in the troubled Southern Caucasus, even if it is clearly not Russian in terms of ethnicity and composition of population, language, culture or religion.⁸²

Armenia remained a Russian hostage after the collapse of the Soviet Union solely because of its history and geography.

Armenia remained a Russian hostage after the collapse of the Soviet Union – once dubbed “the prison of nations”, like the Tsarist Empire – solely because of its history and geography. In this sense, Armenia is both an exception and a counter-example to the general assumption that a country has to border Russia and/or have a relatively sizeable Russian minority in order to be manipulated or politically harassed by the Kremlin.

The Armenian Genocide of 1915–7 is the central and essential modern historical event that has inflicted a perpetual trauma on Armenians at home and abroad.⁸³ It arguably cost the lives of 1.5 million Armenians, and led to an exodus and the emergence of most Armenian diaspora communities around the world. It is constantly commemorated – like the Jewish Holocaust – and highlighted, even provoking political disputes abroad.⁸⁴ The eternal memory of those events and the implicit fear of Turkey push Armenia into the arms of its Christian “protector”.

⁸¹ The title of a poem by Alexander Pushkin (Russian: *Кавказский пленник*), first published in 1821. Leo Tolstoy published in 1872 a novella with the same title, based on a real incident in his life while he was serving in the Russian military. Finally, in 1967, an iconic Soviet comedy was released with a similar title (English: *Kidnapping, Caucasian Style*).

⁸² The total population of Armenia is three million, of which 98.1% are Armenians and only 0.4% Russians. Armenia is a separate branch of the Indo-European languages, and has its own unique script. The Armenian Apostolic Church, the oldest Christian state religion, dating from the early 4th century, is part of Oriental Orthodoxy, to which the Russian Orthodox Church is not affiliated.

⁸³ It should be noted that Turkey does not accept the term “genocide”, and not all EU/Western countries have officially recognised these historic events as genocide.

⁸⁴ E.g. in 2016 the French parliament criminalised denial of the Armenian Genocide, in addition to the Jewish Holocaust, causing tensions in Franco-Turkish relations.

On the other hand, Turkey’s brother nation, Azerbaijan, is in direct conflict with Armenia over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, and some other small adjacent territories. The Armenians are seemingly better fighters, but the comparative size of Azerbaijan (in terms of population, the economy – including oil wealth – and armed forces, including similar weapons provided by Russia) leaves Armenia no choice other than a military alliance with Moscow, including the presence of Russian armed forces on its territory. Moscow has no interest in a lasting resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as long as the conflict keeps Armenia under its tutelage, and allows Russia to contain Turkish and Iranian influence in the Southern Caucasus. Thus, the Kremlin skilfully and ruthlessly exploits Armenia’s security concerns about its neighbours, Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Armenia is perhaps the least important of Russia’s “allies” considered in this report, as it has very little economic appeal and significance for the EU and other Western nations, and is virtually unable to escape Russia’s dominance. It is, nevertheless, interesting to take a closer look at Armenia’s situation and efforts to break free and build relations with the West, within Yerevan’s rather limited room for manoeuvre.

5.1 MILITARY CONSIDERATIONS

Military cooperation between Armenia and Russia consists of bilateral agreements on the Russian military presence in Armenia, including the base in Gyumri and the FSB-subordinated border guards, as well as the joint air defence of Armenia’s airspace and Armenia’s membership of the CSTO.

Gyumri, Armenia’s second-largest city and close to the Turkish border, hosts a 5,000-strong Russian garrison. The Russian forces in Gyumri belong to the Group of Russian Forces in Transcaucasia, which is practically a part of Russia’s Southern Military District.⁸⁵ The

⁸⁵ The military base consists of three mechanised infantry, one artillery and one anti-aircraft missile regiments. Units of fourth-generation MiG-29 fighter jets are also deployed in the region. The Russian base has about 100 T-72 tanks, around 150 BMP-2 and BTR-70/80 armoured vehicles, BM-21 Grad and BM-30 Smerch multiple rocket launchers, a battalion of S-300V and Buk-M1 air-defence systems, and Mi-24 and Mi-8 helicopters. “Operational Group of Russian Forces in the Transcaucasia,” Global Security, accessed May 14, 2017, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/ogrv-transcaucasia.htm>.

permanent deployment of forces in Armenia follows the same logic adopted by Russia in the case of other non-adjacent CSTO or CIS allies like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. On the other hand, Armenia has a more difficult geography, which – combined with the state of Russo-Georgian relations since 2008 – makes the rotation and resupply of the Russian contingent possible only by air.⁸⁶

The permanent deployment of forces in Armenia follows the same logic adopted by Russia in the case of other non-adjacent CSTO or CIS allies like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

As early as 2010, presidents Medvedev and Sargsyan extended the Russia-Armenia defence agreement (initially signed in 1995) for the period 2020–44.⁸⁷ Moscow promised Armenia more modern military equipment, mostly similar to the equipment of the Russian forces in Gyumri (including modernised Mig-29 fighter aircraft and S-300 air-defence missile systems). The Russian Border Service of the FSB in Armenia (about 4,500 strong, deployed in Gyumri, Armavir, Artashat and Meghri) is responsible, along with Armenian border guards, for the protection of the southern borders of Armenia, and regular joint drills are conducted.⁸⁸ In fact, the whole structure and organisation of the Soviet-era border guard system along Armenia's border with Turkey (330 km) and Iran (45 km) is well preserved.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ "Georgian MoD Refutes Claim of Russian Military Hardware Transit to Armenia," *Sputnik News*, March 23, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201703231051873729-georgia-mod-hardware-russia/> (accessed April 1, 2017).

⁸⁷ Breffni O'Rourke, "Russia, Armenia Sign Extended Defence Pact," *RFE/RL*, August 20, 2010, https://www.rferl.org/a/Russian_President_Medvedev_To_Visit_Armenia/2131915.html (accessed March 12, 2017).

⁸⁸ "New head of Russian border guards in Armenia appointed," *Arka News Agency*, March 9, 2015, http://arka.am/en/news/politics/new_head_of_russian_border_guards_in_armenia_appointed/ (accessed May 15, 2017); "Russian, Armenian Border Guards Hold Joint Drills Near Iran's Border," *Sputnik News*, July 10, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201707101055407837-russia-armenia-joint-border-drills/> (accessed August 10, 2017).

⁸⁹ "Major-general Biryukov became Head of Russia's FSB Border Guard Command in Armenia," *RIA Novosti*, November 26, 2014, https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20141126/1035307367.html (accessed June 10, 2017).

Russia sells military equipment to both Armenia and Azerbaijan, which provoked resentment among Armenians, especially after renewed hostilities and casualties in April 2016 around Nagorno-Karabakh, the fiercest fighting since 1994.⁹⁰ Moscow sells to the two rival countries mostly similar equipment, but in far larger quantities to Azerbaijan, which has the financial resources to pay, than to Armenia, which remains increasingly indebted to Russia, in spite of bartering its enterprises and infrastructure with Russian oligarchs and state-owned companies.⁹¹ Russia reassures Yerevan that it will fulfil its obligations to defend its "ally". In October 2013, the chief commander of Russia's 102nd military base, Andrey Ruzinsky, was quoted in the Russian media as saying: "If Azerbaijan decides to restore jurisdiction over Nagorno-Karabakh by force, the [Russian] military base may join in the armed conflict in accordance with the Russian Federation's obligations within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation".⁹²

In July 2017, Vladimir Putin ratified a bilateral deal with Yerevan that envisages the creation of joint Russian-Armenian military forces.

In July 2017, Vladimir Putin ratified a bilateral deal with Yerevan that envisages the creation of joint Russian-Armenian military forces, including a joint command, whose leader is appointed by the Supreme Commander of the Armenian Armed Forces (president Sargsyan), in agreement with the Supreme Commander of the Russian Armed Forces (Putin).⁹³ In December 2015, Russian defence minister Sergei Shoygu and his Armenian counterpart, Seyran Ohanyan,

⁹⁰ "Russia says won't halt arms sales to arch-foes Armenia and Azerbaijan," *Reuters*, April 9, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nagorno-karabakh-russia-arms/russia-says-wont-halt-arms-sales-to-arch-foes-armenia-and-azerbaijan-idUSK6NOX60DS> (accessed June 10, 2017).

⁹¹ "Russian Arms Sales to Armenia Won't End Disparity with Baku," *ANCA*, August 16, 2016, <https://anca.org/russian-arms-sales-to-armenia-wont-end-disparity-with-baku/> (accessed August 20, 2017).

⁹² "Russian military base may interfere in case of Azerbaijan's provocation," *Armenpress*, October 31, 2013, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/738459/russian-military-base-may-interfere-in-case-of-azerbaijan%E2%80%99s-provocations.html> (accessed May 10, 2017).

⁹³ "Putin Ratifies Deal on Joint Russian-Armenian Military Units," *RFE/RL*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-armenia-joint-military-units/28643630.html> (accessed July 29, 2017).

signed an agreement to form a Joint Air Defence System in the Caucasus, which was approved by Armenia's National Assembly in June 2016 by a vote of 102–8.⁹⁴ Thus, the Kremlin has successfully taken effective control of the armed forces of this “ally”.

The A2/AD effect, especially in Armenia, cannot be effectively achieved without short-range mobile ballistic missile systems such as *Iskander-M*. Despite Moscow's claims that it refuses to sell, or restricts the sale of, *Iskander* systems to its “allies”, there are multiple reports of such systems deployed in Armenia, and even being shown in parades.⁹⁵

Thus, Russia has continuously increased its control over the Armenian armed forces and guarding Armenia's borders with Turkey and Iran. There are no Russian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh, but the Russian presence in Armenia is sufficient to suggest on whose side the Kremlin stands. In addition, the fact that Russia sells arms, in large quantities, to both Armenia and Azerbaijan, raises the appetite of both conflicted neighbours for an endless “restoration of regional balance”. A Russian “peacekeeping” force in or around Nagorno-Karabakh (discussed below) could allow Russia also to gain a foothold on the territory of Azerbaijan through the back door, but this seems not to be agreeable to Baku. The Russian military presence in Armenia also acts as leverage against Georgia.

5.2 ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

With a population of only three million, Armenia is the poorest of Russia's “allies”.⁹⁶ Its export capacity is very limited (mostly to Russia), particularly minerals, tobacco, brandy, and aluminium foil processed at a factory owned by the Russian oligarch Oleg

Deripaska.⁹⁷ The foreign trade deficit is very large (almost 80%, or 1.4 billion US dollars in 2016), mainly due to imports of hydrocarbons, as well as most commodities, from Russia. Russian natural gas is twice as expensive (330 dollars per 1,000 cubic metres) as the nominal import price, because the joint-stock local enterprise, Gazprom Armenia, adds the same amount to Armenia-end customers, for its own profit, as Gazprom takes from the Armenian government. The Kremlin manages to constrain Yerevan by manipulating Armenian oligarchs to continue to buy Russian gas. Nevertheless, there is also a trade scheme with Tehran – the importation of Iranian gas and export of surplus electricity – which Armenia seeks to expand. This scheme, and Armenia's efforts to find other alternatives for natural gas supply, including from Turkmenistan, has currently reduced gas prices in the country.⁹⁸

The minimum wage in Armenia is around 100 euro, while the average monthly wage is no more than 300 euro.⁹⁹ About one-third of the country's population lives below the official poverty line. The cheap labour force may be therefore attractive for investors, but Armenia's industrial and service sector base is very weak, and widespread corruption is a major disincentive to investment. In fact, even Armenians abroad (from a worldwide diaspora of six to seven million) are reluctant to invest in their homeland, with a few exceptions.¹⁰⁰ Rather, Armenia is a major exporter of migrant workers, mostly to Russia (estimates vary between 1.5 and 2.5 million), whose remittances to their families and relatives are a major factor in social stability (or just basic subsistence) and represent some 20% of the country's GDP.

⁹⁴ “Armenia Ratifies Agreement of Joint Air-Defence System with Russia,” *Reuters*, June 30, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-russia-defence/armenia-ratifies-agreement-on-joint-air-defense-system-with-russia-idUSKCN0ZG2AS> (accessed May 17, 2017).

⁹⁵ “Why Russia restricts sales of Iskander missile systems to its closest partners,” *Sputnik News*, September 3, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/military/201709031057046466-iskander-exports-prospects-analysis/> (accessed September 30, 2017); “Armenia displays new missiles at Independence Day Parade,” *The Armenian Weekly*, September 22, 2016, <https://armenian-weekly.com/2016/09/22/armenia-displays-new-missiles-at-independence-day-parade/> (accessed September 10, 2017).

⁹⁶ “Armenia GDP,” *Trading Economics*, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://tradingeconomics.com/armenia/gdp>.

⁹⁷ “Armenia,” OEC, accessed June 12, 2017, <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/arm/>; “Armenal,” RUSAL, accessed September 19, 2017, <https://rusal.ru/en/about/9/>.

⁹⁸ William Powell, “Armenia Eyes Turkmen Gas,” *Natural Gas World*, October 23, 2017. <https://www.naturalgasworld.com/armenia-eyes-turkmen-gas-56230> (accessed October 25, 2017).

⁹⁹ “Armenia Minimum Wages,” *Trading Economics*, accessed November 10, 2017, <https://tradingeconomics.com/armenia/minimum-wages>.

¹⁰⁰ The exceptions include an Argentinian Armenian, Eduardo Ernekian, who invested heavily in Yerevan's international airport, vineyards and IT companies, and a couple of Russian Armenians who have invested in infrastructure (the allegedly pro-Western Ruben Vartanyan) and electricity networks and real estate (the pro-Russian Samuel Karapetyan, arguably the richest Armenian in Russia).

Local (and Russian) oligarchs are the virtual rulers and owners of Armenia's economy and politics. A corrupt system keeps Armenia closely tied to Russia, but the biggest problem seems to be the lack of vision (even compared to Kazakhstan).¹⁰¹ Arguably, it is easier for foreigners to invest in Armenia, but only in non-monopoly sectors, e.g. IT, which do not harm the interests of oligarchs. The IT sector is developing quite quickly, compared to other sectors, but the overall domestic economic environment in Armenia will probably slow the process down.

Russia-friendly and corrupt local politicians are the perfect tools for securing Armenia's continued gravitation in the Kremlin's orbit.

5.3 POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Russia-friendly and corrupt local politicians are the perfect tools for securing Armenia's continued gravitation in the Kremlin's orbit. In fact, Moscow does not face serious Western political competition in Armenia, unlike in Georgia or even – to some extent – Azerbaijan. Armenians are, in general, no big fans of Russia, but most of them nevertheless feel constrained to show their loyalty to Russia, mainly because of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. This issue forms the core of Armenia's domestic politics and its sense of security (or lack of it). Even the Armenian diaspora in the West (mostly in the US, the UK, and France) does not seem to disapprove of or question Yerevan's alliance with Moscow.

Armenians are, in general, no big fans of Russia, but most of them nevertheless feel constrained to show their loyalty to Russia, mainly because of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

Armenia, unlike Belarus and Kazakhstan, has not been ruled since independence by a lifetime autocrat, but rather by a succession of oligarchs (Serzh Sargsyan, in office since 2008, is the country's third president). Armenia has taken certain steps towards a more parliament-oriented political system, but the local political stage is dominated by the president's ruling party (the Republican Party), just like its big brother's "United Russia". Armenians call it a "semi-democratic system". Nevertheless, civil society and the information space are not suppressed as in Russia. There are a number of opposition- and/or Western-minded NGOs and media channels, which – strangely – seem to live and act as if in a parallel world that does not seriously concern or interfere with the country's political and economic direction, the realm of the oligarchs. Armenia's leaders probably do not see the need to wipe out all types of (democratic liberal) opposition, because they simply do not feel threatened.

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Russian TV channels (i.e. Kremlin propaganda) are accessible to and watched daily by a large majority of Armenians, which also helps to maintain their knowledge of the Russian language. However, Armenians are not Russified, unlike most Belarusians and Kazakhs. Russian is increasingly a foreign language in Armenia, and it already faces serious competition from English, especially in terms of elite schools (which are preparing the next generation of leaders), as well as street advertising, use of the internet etc. Russia's chief propagandists, Dmitry Kisselyov and Vladimir Solovyov, have complained about the decreasing use and visibility of the Russian language in Armenia, but there is very little that the Kremlin can do, especially to induce Armenian children to

¹⁰¹ David Petrosyan, "Oligarchy in Armenia," *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, July 17, 2013, 11, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CAD-53-54-11-18.pdf> (accessed September 1, 2017).

study in Russian-language schools, which has never occurred, even in Soviet times.¹⁰²

The EU and its individual member states are by far the biggest investors and donors in building Armenia's civil society and infrastructure, but there are very few visible signs, which in turn allows many Armenians to assume, wrongly, that Russia is the country's real and main supporter.

The West is quite prudent in showing its interest and influence in Armenia, limited though it is, presumably in order not to antagonise, and potentially provoke yet another dispute or “conflict of interests” with, Russia. The EU and its individual member states are by far the biggest investors and donors in building Armenia's civil society and infrastructure, but there are very few visible signs, which in turn allows many Armenians to assume, wrongly, that Russia is the country's real and main supporter. It seems that Russia does not object to the rather generous Western aid offered to Armenia, as long as this is done “quietly”, which allows the Kremlin to take the credit.¹⁰³

Nagorno-Karabakh is a very different type of “frozen conflict” in the post-Soviet space, comparable in some ways to “separatist” Donbass rather than to Transnistria, Abkhazia or South Ossetia. There are no Russian troops in the area, which is – like Armenia – ethnically homogeneous, but Russia benefits directly from the conflict, and therefore has no reason to seek a lasting resolution that could diminish its future influence over both parties. Following the briefly renewed fighting in 2016, Russia proposed that a peacekeeping force be deployed to the “disputed border region” of

¹⁰² “The use of Russian language in Armenia,” *Eritasard*, <http://eritasard.am/news/en/74920> (accessed April 3, 2017).

¹⁰³ The EU has provided 473 million euro to some 25,000 Armenian businesses since 2009.

“EU is helping businesses grow in Armenia,” EEAS, October 26, 2017, accessed November 1, 2017, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia/34555/eu-helping-businesses-grow-armenia_en.

In addition, the US has invested heavily in Armenia's hydro-electricity sector, without much visibility.

Nagorno-Karabakh, but soon abandoned the idea¹⁰⁴ because of anticipated opposition from Azerbaijan. Formally, a compromise deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan depends on their ability to redraw the boundary around Nagorno-Karabakh, in order to return certain areas to Azerbaijan but retain a land corridor to Armenia (which is an absolute condition for Yerevan, but seems not to be agreeable to Baku). The deep mistrust and enmity of the two sides, as well as the traditional approach of the “elephant in the room” (Russia), hardly promises a future win-win deal and a final resolution of the conflict.

6. KAZAKHSTAN: THE STAN WITH A VISION

Kazakhstan occupies the vast steppes of Central Asia between China, Russia, the Caspian Sea and the other post-Soviet *stans*. Hence, it stands as a huge buffer between Russia and the Islamic fundamentalism spreading further south, particularly in Afghanistan, but also on China's old and renewed commercial routes to Europe and the Middle East. The Western interest seems to be largely limited to Kazakhstan's rich oil and natural gas resources in the Caspian Sea basin.

Russia's powerful linguistic, cultural and mental, political and economic grip on Kazakhstan seems to be loosening slowly, but irreversibly.

At the time of the Soviet Union's collapse, Kazakhstan was on the verge of losing almost entirely its national identity and the majority status of the indigenous population, the Kazakhs. The northern regions (oblasts) of the country were virtually Russified, and were separated by large and almost uninhabited portions of territory from the Kazakh-inhabited south. Nevertheless, the demographic and cultural situation has changed dramatically in recent decades. The country's capital, and hundreds of thousands of ethnic Kazakhs, moved north,

¹⁰⁴ “Idea to Send Peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh Out of Agenda – Russian Envoy,” *Sputnik News*, June 30, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201606301042202109-peacekeepers-karabakh-russia/> (accessed March 12, 2017).

the proportion of Kazakhs in the country's multi-ethnic population rose to two-thirds, and the Kazakh language – soon to be written again in Latin script – has experienced a government-driven revival.

Russia's powerful linguistic, cultural and mental, political and economic grip on Kazakhstan seems to be loosening slowly, but irreversibly. Russia faces increasing competition from China's economic expansion, and – most importantly – from Kazakhstan's own desire to come out of Moscow's shadow. The biggest and richest post-Soviet *stan* by far has a president with a vision, who wishes to strengthen the country's sovereignty and skilfully balances the interests of Russia, China and the West in the region.

Kazakhstan has the potential to be attractive to the Western world beyond making big money in the country's oil-and-gas sector and the extraction of minerals.

Kazakhstan has the potential to be attractive to the Western world beyond making big money in the country's oil-and-gas sector and the extraction of minerals. Apart from other business and investment opportunities, e.g. in the construction sector and infrastructure, the West could become a far more active political and cultural actor in Kazakhstan, which would also serve the purpose of strengthening its economic interests in Central Asia.

6.1 SOME GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Kazakhstan, a country as big as Western Europe and with a total population comparable in size to that of the Netherlands, is vital to Russia's political interests. It is the only Central Asian post-Soviet republic that borders Russia, and it is larger and richer (but far less populous) than the other four post-Soviet *stans* combined.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Kazakhstan: population (est.) – 18 millions; GDP (est.) – 460 billion US dollars; and area – 2.75 million km². Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan combined: population (est.) – 51.8 millions; GDP (est.) – 283.4 billion US dollars; and area – 1.28 million km². See: "World Factbook, 2016," CIA, accessed September 5, 2017. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

Kazakhstan initiated the establishment of the EAEU, an idea suggested by President Nursultan Nazarbayev as early as 1994, and it is the key member of CSTO in Central Asia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), established in 2001, has significantly enlarged, but its focus continues to remain on Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, as the playground for competing interests and eventual cooperation between Russia and China.¹⁰⁶

The SCO framework will not be sufficiently effective, in the long run, to maintain the status quo, i.e. to keep the five Central Asian republics in Moscow's orbit in an unchallenged manner. China is, for now, politically cautious, but its growing economic power and interest in the region, combined with Russian economic decline/stagnation, leaves little room for misjudging future developments.¹⁰⁷ Russia is therefore forced to use any leverage that could consolidate its status of "protector" of Kazakhstan, and somehow subtly maintain Kazakh suspicions about China's "hidden agenda", including the OBOR project.¹⁰⁸ In fact, China enshrined the OBOR in the Communist Party constitution in October 2017, which shows that the project

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is at the heart of China's foreign policy and international development strategy.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Mathieu Duchatel, François Godement, Kadri Liik, Jeremy Shapiro, Louisa Slavkova, Angela Stanzel and Vessela Tcherneva, "Eurasian Integration: Caught between Russia and China," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 7, 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay_eurasian (accessed April 13, 2017).

¹⁰⁷ "Chinese Influence in Central Asia: on the Rise," *Foreign Brief*, July 29, 2016, <http://www.foreignbrief.com/asia-pacific/china/china-russia-central-asia-great-game> (accessed July 17, 2017).

¹⁰⁸ Raffaello Pantucci, "China's Place in Central Asia," *Eurasianet*, June 20, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/79306> (accessed May 20, 2017).

¹⁰⁹ Cobus van Staden, "One Belt One Road and East Africa: Beyond Chinese Influence," *Jamestown Foundation*, November 10, 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/one-belt-one-road-east-africa-beyond-chinese-influence/?mc_cid=77110365ef&mc_eid=37ede26c1f (accessed November 15, 2017).

The United States and the EU have no apparent particular political interests in Kazakhstan, and Central Asia as a whole, as there is no sign of coherent Western policies (strategies, doctrines) in that respect. However, Western (mainly American, Dutch and British) business

Western business interests in Kazakhstan allow the Kazakh authorities to pursue more successfully their “multi-vector” foreign policy, which promotes the country’s prestige and world/regional status, and offers some room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis Russia and China.

interests in Kazakhstan allow the Kazakh authorities (i.e. president Nazarbayev and his administration) to pursue more successfully their “multi-vector” foreign policy, which promotes the country’s prestige and world/regional status, and offers some room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis Russia and China.

The central feature of Kazakhstan’s state order and ambitions is president Nazarbayev (aged 77), the “father” of the emerging modern Kazakh nation.¹¹⁰ He is not just another Central Asian dictator, but a rather skilful politician who is also respected by Vladimir Putin. He seems to know, all too well, how not to antagonise Russia, and to respect China and attract the West. He aims to consolidate, as much as possible, the future of Kazakhstan as a wealthy and open country, in which its many nationalities live in harmony while the indigenous Kazakhs remain the uncontested masters. However, following the death of Uzbekistan’s long-time dictator Islam Karimov in September 2016, the issue of post-Nazarbayev succession and continuation of his vision/policy became prominent, even if not openly discussed in the country.

6.2 PETRO-ECONOMY

The energy sector dominates Kazakhstan’s economy, especially the export of oil and natural gas from the North- and Pre-Caspian basins.¹¹¹ The country is dependent on revenue

¹¹⁰ He holds the official title “Leader of the Nation”.

¹¹¹ The Kashagan and Tengiz fields have estimated reserves of 22 billion barrels of oil, while the Karachaganak gas condensate field contains some 1.2 trillion cubic metres of natural gas and one billion tonnes of condensate and crude oil.

from oil and gas sales for up to 70% of the state budget, as in the case of Russia.

Before the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia, and the collapse in oil prices, president Nazarbayev launched “systemic reforms” and proposed development targets to transform and modernise the rentier state’s economy by 2050. The economic crisis that emerged in 2014 hastened the need for reform, but the realisation of Nazarbayev’s platform continues to hang on the country’s oil-and-gas sector and revenues. Thus, oil and gas are Kazakhstan’s fortune and misfortune.

Where there is plentiful oil and gas, there are always wealthy business partners swarming around. The world’s largest oil-and-gas companies have invested heavily and are now the main shareholders, in control of various oil- and gas-field consortia.¹¹² However, the main pipeline for Kazakh oil exports, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), is fully controlled by Russia, which may at any time use it as political leverage.¹¹³ The Trans-Caspian Oil Transportation System, a proposed project to transport Kazakh oil through the Caspian Sea to Baku in Azerbaijan, and on to the Mediterranean and/or Black Sea coast, could certainly be a challenging alternative to the CPC, but Russia is doing everything possible to prevent alternative routes that it cannot control.

6.3 MILITARY ASPECTS

Kazakhstan Armed Forces (KAF) are small compared to the country’s size, at just under 40,000 personnel – a mere shadow of the huge former Soviet contingent in the country.¹¹⁴ The size and composition of the KAF clearly reflects the country’s strategic rationale – it does not make sense to build up significantly larger and better-equipped armed forces that would nonetheless never be able to defend the

¹¹² Chevron, Exxon Mobil, Royal Dutch Shell, Eni, Lukoil, Total, China National Petroleum Corporation and Inpex, as well as Kazakhstan’s state-owned oil-and-gas company, KazMunayGas.

¹¹³ A consortium and a pipeline to transport oil from the Tengiz, Kashagan and Karachaganak fields to the Novorossiysk-2 Marine Terminal on Russia’s Black Sea coast.

¹¹⁴ The ground forces have some 20,000 personnel, the air force 12,000, and the navy 3,000, which is about one-tenth in terms of personnel and equipment of the former Soviet contingent in Kazakhstan.

country against China or Russia. Instead, the KAF only makes sense to deter Kazakhstan's main Central Asian rival, Uzbekistan, and participate in regional Russian-led CSTO "anti-terrorist" operations, particularly in Tajikistan. In addition, the KAF is obviously the Kazakh authorities'/elite's ultimate tool for maintaining internal security and preserving their firm grip on power.¹¹⁵

There are five Russian military "scientific research ranges" in Kazakhstan, all Soviet remnants under Russian jurisdiction, including the famous Baikonur Cosmodrome, which still enables the launch of the entire range of existing types of (Russian) missile. Kazakh intellectuals recently protested against the government's secret plans to lease to Russia tracts of land for opening new missile bases, especially due to their proposed location – sacred land in Kostanay, the birthplace of significant Kazakh historical figures.¹¹⁶

Kazakhstan remains rather cautious, especially due to extreme Russian sensitivity, about engaging in any particularly visible and politically "provocative" cooperation activities with NATO and/or its member states. Nevertheless, it has conducted regular exercises (*Steppe Eagle*) with the United States, the United Kingdom and with other Central Asian countries on its territory, aimed at certifying KAZBAT, a peacekeeping force trained for UN operations according to NATO standards. It seems that Kazakhstan is also considering opportunities to diversify its list of suppliers of armaments and other military equipment.¹¹⁷

6.4 RUSSIA'S ECONOMIC STRUGGLE WITH CHINA OVER KAZAKHSTAN AND CENTRAL ASIA

President Nazarbayev was an ardent proponent of the creation of the EAEU, which ultimately took effect on 1 January 2015. He allegedly had in mind an economic space rather than a political union.¹¹⁸ The EAEU, in spite of great fanfare and the political weight put behind it by the Kremlin, has not fulfilled the aspirations of Kazakhstan or other member states. The Kazakh economy has not enjoyed tangible benefits from this initiative, while it struggles with low oil prices and economic difficulties. On the contrary, the EAEU is proving to be Moscow's political Trojan

The EAEU is proving to be Moscow's political Trojan horse, making the Kazakh economy increasingly dependent on the convulsions and fluctuations of the Russian economy.

horse, making the Kazakh economy increasingly dependent on the convulsions and fluctuations of the Russian economy. In addition, it has demonstrated disruptive effects with regard to Kazakhstan's economic and trade relationship with its non-EAEU neighbours, particularly China, and some other countries.¹¹⁹ No wonder president Nazarbayev has repeatedly threatened to leave the EAEU.¹²⁰

On the other hand, Russian activities in Central Asia have intensified because the Kremlin is concerned about growing Chinese influence. Russia is marking its territory. In this sense, we are now witnessing a "Second Great Game" in Central Asia, this time between formally "allied" Russia and China, while the West has rather moderate – mostly economic – influence.¹²¹ The SCO seems to be the perfect – Western-exclusive – framework for

¹¹⁵ For these purposes, there are also a number of special forces units that belong to various Kazakh security agencies that are not part of the KAF. The National Security Committee has the Arystan commando unit, and the Border Guard, the Police and even the Presidency also reportedly have their own units.

¹¹⁶ "Public Protests Against Russian Military Presence Mounting in Kazakhstan," *Qostanay TV*, February 26, 2016, https://qostanay.tv/obshchestvo/oblomki-rossiyskih-raket-budut-padat-v-kostanayskoy-oblasti?mc_cid=5b1a036364&mc_eid=37ede26c1f (accessed November 3, 2017).

¹¹⁷ Stephen Blank, "What can we learn from Kazakhstan's arms deals?" *The Diplomat*, March 5, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/03/what-can-we-learn-from-kazakhstans-arms-deals/> (accessed March 10, 2017).

¹¹⁸ Russia conveniently omits the "Economic" factor, preferring to use the name "Eurasian Union", in order to emphasise its willingness to create and strengthen a political framework, not just an economic one.

¹¹⁹ In addition, Kyrgyzstan shows visible signs of dissatisfaction with EAEU-/Russian-imposed restrictions on trade with China.

¹²⁰ Fabio Indeo, "The Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt: the Impact of Sino-Russia Geopolitical Strategies in the Eurasia Region," *Centre for Eurasian Studies*, May 10, 2017, <http://greater-europe.org/archives/2720> (accessed May 22, 2017).

¹²¹ Recalling the first Great Game between Tsarist Russia and the British Empire.

balancing the interests of Russia and China in Central Asia. It does not really offer direct and significant benefits to Kazakhstan, but it serves to encapsulate the geopolitical equation of the Central Asian region: Russia is the strategic “protector” and China is the strategic “investor”, while Westerners – as outsiders – are simply beneficial “money-makers”.

China’s new “Silk Way” (OBOR) seemed for many years to be more a piece of rhetoric than a politically and eco-nomically motivated and calculated project of significant importance to Beijing. However, it appears that things have recently changed. China’s president Xi Jinping pledged in May 2017 to invest 124 billion US dollars in the development of OBOR, in order to improve ports, roads and railways.¹²² The Chinese plan aims to expand trade links between Asia, Africa, Europe and beyond, using the ancient land-based routes as a model. China will support countries engaged in OBOR with nine billion US dollars. While China has invested heavily in the mountainous roads of the markedly poorer Kyrgyzstan, it remains to be seen to what extent Beijing will be prepared to invest in Kazakhstan’s transportation infrastructure. Understandably, Beijing presents OBOR as a model of cooperation and mutual benefit rather than an expression of expanding Chinese influence. Both Russia and India regard OBOR as geopolitical competition, but Russia cannot overtly oppose China’s initiative. After all, Russia does not have many real allies, and it has made a “pivot” to Asia, towards China. In addition, the Kremlin could earn certain benefits from OBOR, mainly in terms of investment.¹²³ On the other hand, the EU has raised questions over the transparency of OBOR projects and respective procedures, rather than from a geopolitical perspective.¹²⁴

¹²² “China encircles the World with One Belt, One Road strategy,” *The Financial Times*, May 3, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/0714074a-0334-11e7-aa5b-6bb07f5c8e12> (accessed June 12, 2017).

¹²³ On 14 December 2017, at his 13th yearly press conference, Russia’s president Vladimir Putin made clear hints that OBOR and EAEU are “compatible”, and he expects further significant Chinese investments in Russia’s Arctic region, as well as China using actively the Northern-Eastern Passage (which Russia has already secured by reopening virtually all Soviet-era military airfields and naval bases in the Arctic).

¹²⁴ Philippe Le Corre, “Europe’s mixed views on China’s One Belt, One Road initiative,” *Brookings*, May 23, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/05/23/europes-mixed-views-on-chinas-one-belt-one-road-initiative/> (accessed June 29, 2017).

7. THE EU’S EASTERN PARTNERSHIP AND THE “ALLIES”

A few weeks after NATO’s Bucharest Summit in April 2008, Poland and Sweden proposed the Eastern Partnership (EaP), an EU initiative for discussing and eventually concluding agreements with the European post-Soviet states on trade, rules and procedures for travel, and other issues of common interest.¹²⁵ Russia’s aggression against Georgia in August 2008 was the Kremlin’s response to what it perceived as a direct Western challenge – i.e. alleged attempts to encourage not only Ukraine and Georgia, but also the other EaP countries, including the “allies”, to defect from Moscow’s orbit. Russia continues, to this day, to regard the West’s benign approach to the EU’s and NATO’s eastern neighbours as a *de facto* proxy war for political, economic and cultural zones of influence.

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Following Russia’s action against Georgia, the EU chose to appease the Kremlin and quickly resumed business as usual. Nevertheless, the EU did not abandon the EaP, and went ahead with the preparation of association agreements. In 2013, Russia exerted tremendous pressure on EaP countries, including Ukraine, in order to force them to give up plans to conclude agreements with the EU, which Moscow considered incompatible with and even destructive to its own plans for launching the EAEU on 1 January 2015.¹²⁶ In addition to the Kremlin’s obvious aim of regaining influence over Ukraine through aggression and destabilisation, it is reasonable to assume that Russia took immediate military, political and propaganda action, after the end of the Winter

¹²⁵ EaP includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. “Eastern Partnership,” EEAS, accessed May 10, 2017, https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/eastern-partnership_en?page=2.

¹²⁶ Consequently, in late 2013 Ukraine, under President Viktor Yanukovich, and Armenia abandoned their plans to conclude association agreements with the EU.

Olympic Games in Sochi (February 2014), in order to deal a severe and decisive blow to the EaP and Ukraine's prospects of joining NATO.

Thereafter, the EaP process proceeded firmly, but the EaP countries seemed to become somewhat polarised. The first chapters of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement were signed on 21 March 2014 – the very day Russia officially annexed Crimea. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova finally concluded association agreements with the EU, which establish Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, on 27 June 2014, while Russian supported “separatists” waged fierce battles in Donbas. The agreements with Georgia and Moldova came into force in July 2016, while the agreement with Ukraine took effect only in September 2017, after rather obvious Russian attempts to derail the ratification process in the Netherlands.¹²⁷

Oil-rich Azerbaijan does not have economic and political/security incentives to join the EAEU and/or the CSTO, but the negotiations on a new agreement with the EU started only in February 2017, as EU members had concerns about the country's political system.¹²⁸

Belarus and Armenia, Russia's “allies”, bowed to the Kremlin's pressure and became, together with Kazakhstan, founding members of the EAEU on 1 January 2015. Armenia only signed a “light” agreement with the EU, a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), at the EaP Summit in Brussels on 24 November 2017, four years after the beginning of negotiations.¹²⁹ Armenia's CEPA retains a certain amount of content from the sacrificed draft Association Agreement (of 2013) in the areas of political dialogue, justice and human rights, and it also takes into account the country's commitments and limitations as

a member of the EAEU.¹³⁰ With Belarus, the EU “deepens, in carefully calibrated mutual steps, its critical engagement”.¹³¹ In February 2017, the EU decided to prolong restrictive measures against Belarus for one year.¹³² This was despite the increasing interest shown by Belarus in cooperation with the Union.¹³³

Armenia's president, Serzh Sargsyan, participated in the EaP Summit in Brussels because he signed the CEPA with Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. President Lukashenko of Belarus, whose EU travel ban (which precluded him from participating in the EaP summit in Riga in 2015) was lifted, nevertheless declined to participate in the Brussels summit. He had nothing to sign, and the EU was apparently not ready to take significant steps forward in relation to Belarus. The Belarusian foreign minister represented his country at the summit, and implied in his statements that Minsk had not been

The EaP countries form a decreasingly homogeneous group. Belarus and Armenia, Russia's “allies”, are obviously in a far more difficult position than other EaP countries because of their EAEU membership and tremendous pressure from Moscow.

under pressure from Moscow but expected a significantly different attitude from the EU, and achievements – most probably in terms of negotiating a CEPA similar to Armenia's – before meetings at the highest level could take place.¹³⁴

¹²⁷ J.J. Patrick, “Dutch Senate votes in favour of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine,” *ByLine*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.byline.com/column/67/article/1699> (accessed June 22, 2017).

¹²⁸ “EU-Azerbaijan Relations,” EEAS, accessed November 5, 2017, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/4013/EU-Azerbaijan%20relations.

¹²⁹ “Armenia, EU Sign Landmark Agreement in Brussels,” *The Armenian Weekly*, November 24, 2017, <https://armenianweekly.com/2017/11/24/armenia-eu-sign-landmark-agreement-brussels/> (accessed November 26, 2017).

¹³⁰ Hrant Kostanian, “EU-Armenian relations charting a new course,” *CEPS*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.ceps.eu/publications/eu-armenian-relations-charting-fresh-course> (accessed November 17, 2017).

¹³¹ “EU Relations with Belarus,” European Council, accessed November 26, 2017, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/belarus/>.

¹³² An arms embargo, and the asset freeze and travel ban against four people listed in connection with the unresolved disappearance of two opposition politicians, one businessman and one journalist in 1999 and 2000.

¹³³ Jaan Reinhold, “Milline on olnud idapartnerluse hooaeg?” [How successful has been the last season of the Eastern Partnership?], *ECEAP*, November 29, 2017, <https://eceap.eu/et/2017/11/29/milline-olnud-idapartnerluse-hooaeg/> (accessed December 1, 2017).

¹³⁴ “The Delegation of Belarus at the Eastern Partnership Summit will be headed by Foreign Minister Makej,” *Belta*, November 21, 2017, <http://www.belta.by/politics/view/delegatsiju-belarusi-na-sammite-vostochnogo-partnerstva-v-brjussele-vozglavit-makej-276813-2017/> (accessed November 22, 2017).

The EaP summit in Brussels resulted in a common agreement on “20 practical goals for 2020” and working together in order to meet three main challenges: improving strategic communications, increasing resilience and matching cooperation.¹³⁵ Since 2009, the EU has given EaP countries over 5.4 billion euro, including significant sums allocated at the summit in Brussels, but money alone is not enough.¹³⁶

The EaP countries form a decreasingly homogeneous group. Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, which have Western-oriented governments, are the frontrunners. Azerbaijan is economically important to the EU, but lags behind due to political considerations. Armenia has just taken its first modest step towards building an agreement-based relationship with the EU, while Belarus has not yet achieved even that. Belarus and Armenia, Russia’s “allies”, are obviously in a far more difficult position than other EaP countries because of their EAEU membership and tremendous pressure from Moscow, which aims to impose strict limits on their political and economic relations with the Union. The implementation by Armenia of its “light” agreement will therefore not be easy and requires Western support.

The EU has pushed the EaP forward since 2009, in spite of many difficulties, including Russia’s war against Ukraine. The Union has signed new agreements with four EaP countries and set out ambitious goals. It provides much-needed financial assistance and practical support. However, the EU should do more to help those lagging behind, especially Russia’s “allies”. Belarus should also be invited to start negotiations on a similar CEPA, which suited Armenia, because there is no major reason to treat these countries significantly differently. Political recognition by the EU, and a clear and consistent message that all EaP members matter, is very significant.

¹³⁵ “Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas: we agreed on 20 practical goals for 2020 at the Eastern Partnership summit,” EU2017, November 24, 2017, accessed November 25, 2017, <https://www.eu2017.ee/news/press-releases/estonian-prime-minister-juri-ratas-we-agreed-20-practical-goals-2020-eastern>.

¹³⁶ Bern Riegert, “EU offers Eastern Partnership countries money, motivation,” DW, November 24, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/eu-offers-eastern-partnership-members-money-motivation/a-41509363> (accessed November 25, 2017).

The countries of the Southern Caucasus have a certain political and economic relevance for the EU, but they are not the Union’s immediate neighbours to the east, like Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, which are far more important. The latter should receive particular attention in the next few years, as long as Minsk demonstrates the wish to conduct dialogue and improve relations with the West. The EU should put more emphasis on projects and initiatives involving Ukraine and Belarus, as well as Georgia and Armenia, in order to develop cooperation between these neighbouring countries, make better use of the potential of Ukraine and Georgia in their respective regions, and offer additional motivation to Russia’s “allies”.

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In this context, emphasis should be placed particularly on trade relations, energy supply and security, transport corridors, the fight against corruption and organised crime, cultural cooperation and human contacts. Russia’s “allies” seem not to be satisfied with their membership of the EAEU, and wish to avoid isolation. The EU has an opportunity, a moral duty and an interest to help them, without questioning or challenging their relations with Russia. Above all, the EU must pursue increased public visibility in Russia’s “allies”, fully corresponding to its cooperative role and the assistance provided.

8. NATO AND RUSSIA’S “ALLIES”

Two of Russia’s “allies” have common borders with NATO member states. Russia regards Belarus as its spearhead to the West, from where the Kremlin pretends to be threatened. Armenia’s position is rather different, having Russian border guards on its frontier with Turkey, and given the current friendly relations between Moscow and Ankara.

Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan joined NATO's Partnership for Peace programme in the mid-1990s. Individual Partnership Programmes (IPP) have been developed and the "allies" have also been engaged in NATO's Planning and Review Process (PARP), but overall relations between them and the Alliance have been so far rather modest.¹³⁷

NATO keeps open channels for dialogue with the "allies", including mutual visits and the organisation of joint events such as security conferences. The NATO Secretary General has appointed a Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, James Appathurai, who cooperates with all eight countries, including Kazakhstan and Armenia, and enjoys support from NATO's Liaison Offices in Tashkent and Tbilisi.¹³⁸ An important aspect of his work is the promotion of understanding of NATO and security issues through engaging with the media and civil society in each country.

Armenia has been the most eager "ally" to participate in international peacekeeping operations, including under NATO's umbrella, such as Kosovo (KFOR) and Afghanistan (ISAF).¹³⁹ It has also participated in NATO-led exercises, but it opted out at the last minute from the most recent exercise – *Agile Spirit* in Georgia – most probably due to Russian pressure.¹⁴⁰

Kazakhstan has conducted the *Steppe Eagle* exercises on its territory since 2003, together with the US, the UK and other Central Asian countries. The US- and UK-supported KAZBAT project is about fully preparing a Kazakh peacekeeping battalion according to NATO standards, which is suited for various international operations/tasks.¹⁴¹

Belarus has no experience of international

peacekeeping or participation in NATO-led exercises, and has no NATO special representative or liaison office. However, Belarus has recently become more open and cooperative, including by inviting military observers from certain NATO countries (including neighbouring Baltic states and

Russia's "allies" should be increasingly engaged in political-security dialogue, military-to-military contacts, mutual observation of exercises and assistance in training their peacekeeping units.

Poland) to the *Zapad 2017* exercise at military ranges on Belarusian territory, and by hosting a NATO-organised security conference in Minsk in December 2017.

Russia's "allies" – especially Belarus, but also CSTO members Armenia and Kazakhstan, as an example to Belarus – should be increasingly engaged in political-security dialogue, military-to-military contacts (visits), mutual observation of exercises (not necessarily under existing frameworks, such as the OCSE Vienna Document), and assistance in training their peacekeeping units according to NATO/UN standards (as appropriate). Confidence-building with Russia's "allies" is possible and necessary, especially in the confrontational atmosphere that has developed between Russia and NATO.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report now presents some general conclusions on the present state of affairs and predictions for the future of Russia's relations with Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan, as well as a number of general policy recommendations for the EU, NATO and their members states, especially those that have particular interests in Russia's "allies".

Belarus is the "ally" to which the EU and its Western partners should devote particular attention. It is not (yet) an extension of Russia, and it may have the chance not to become the Kremlin's appendage if it is not abandoned or neglected by

¹³⁷ "Relations with Belarus," NATO, accessed August 13, 2017, https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/topics_49119.htm.

¹³⁸ "NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia," NATO, accessed October 22, 2017, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50101.htm.

¹³⁹ "Relations with Armenia," NATO, accessed September 17, 2017, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48893.htm.

¹⁴⁰ Joshua Kucera, "At last minute, Armenia drops out of NATO exercises in Georgia," *Eurasia Net*, September 4, 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/84956> (accessed September 15, 2017).

¹⁴¹ Desiree Dillhay, "Multinational exercise reaffirms peacekeeping partnerships," *US Army*, August 16, 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/192460/multinational_exercise_reaffirms_peacekeeping_partnerships (accessed August 29, 2017).

the West. Belarus should be viewed not necessarily independently or in the loose context of the EU's Eastern Partnership, but also in connection with Ukraine, even if the two countries seem for now to have almost contradictory relationships with Moscow, and their own bilateral relations suffer from occasional setbacks.¹⁴²

Belarus may have the chance not to become the Kremlin's appendage if it is not abandoned or neglected by the West.

The central feature, which is more important even than the local average standard of living, concerns the hearts and minds of the Belarusian people. Ukraine has only recently started to de-Sovietise massively and speedily the country's

The image of the West in Belarus can and should be changed through contacts at all levels.

landscape. On the other hand, Belarus remains even more caught in the Soviet past (a deliberate policy of president Lukashenko) than Russia or Kazakhstan, and is making very little effort to change.¹⁴³ More Belarusians, including the young, feel a strong connection with and nostalgia for the Soviet past than those who almost never have that sentiment.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Andrei Makhovski, "Belarus KGB says Ukrainian journalist set up spy ring in Minsk," *Reuters*, November 20, 2017, <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN1DK1JI> (accessed November 21, 2017).

¹⁴³ For example, in the city of Brest, which is the Western gateway to Belarus, the central pedestrian street has been nicely renovated, even with old-fashioned hand-lit gas streetlights (as in the 19th century), a real delight for locals and the few tourists, but the street is still named Sovetskaya. Virtually all towns, and even villages, in Belarus still have main streets named Lenina, Oktyabrskaya, Komsomolskaya etc. The total length of streets named Sovetskaya (not counting villages, altogether some 700 km) exceeds the east-to-west dimension of the whole country. "Lenin" streets come next (440 km). In addition, there are over 400 monuments to Lenin still standing, including in front of the Belarus government building. Tatyana Melnichuk, "Belarus: strait on Sovetskaya street." *BBC Russian*, November 7, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/russian/features-41893991> (accessed November 9, 2017)

¹⁴⁴ 44% of Belarusians "often" or "sometimes" feel a strong affiliation with the Soviet past, and only 23% never feel that way. This proportion corresponds exactly to the pro-Russian (i.e. pro-Kremlin, who regard NATO as the enemy and deem the West responsible for the economic situation in Belarus) and moderate parts of the population, which reflects the effectiveness of Russian (mainly TV) propaganda.

The image of the West in Belarus can and should be changed through contacts at all levels. The Belarusian leadership has no doubt that the West/NATO/EU is not a threat or an enemy, even if relations between the West and Russia have become very difficult and confrontational, but that understanding is not (yet) shared by two-thirds of the Belarusian people. On the other hand, Belarus has the chance to improve its own image in the West if it makes progress in the realms of the rule of law, civil society, entrepreneurship and so on.

Kazakhstan is the second important "ally", mostly due to its rich energy and mineral resources, and its location on important future trade routes, especially the Chinese OBOR. It would be unwise for the West to demand that Kazakhstan's autocratic and clan-ruled system should aim to develop into a liberal democracy, given the country's history, and cultural and geopolitical context. President Nazarbayev and the Kazakhstan elite actively seek international recognition, trade relationships and foreign investment. The West can support their policy and help Kazakhstan

It would be unwise for the West to demand that Kazakhstan's autocratic and clan-ruled system should aim to develop into a liberal democracy.

to break free and successfully play the role of the *stan* with a vision, a model that could be followed by other Central Asian countries.

Armenia has no options other than to maintain a strong defence relationship with Russia. It has very little economic potential in order to be attractive, even to the large Armenian diaspora in the West. In addition, Russia has even chosen to bypass Armenia in terms of transit routes.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Armenia is strategically located between notable actors in the international arena – Turkey and Iran, but also Azerbaijan and Georgia. Yerevan's official

¹⁴⁵ Rahim Rahimov, "North-South Transport Corridor: Russia Wins, Armenia Loses," *Jamestown Foundation*, November 9, 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/north-south-transport-corridor-russia-wins-armenia-loses/?mc_cid=77110365ef&mc_eid=37ede26c1f (accessed November 12, 2017).

interest vis-à-vis Moscow should not leave the impression that Armenian society is different or less pro-European than Georgian society. The two Christian nations have different languages, scripts and cultures, but they have great potential for mutual cooperation, especially in Armenia's interests. The West could support Armenia to be more open and cooperative, including in its relations with neighbouring Georgia.

Yerevan's official interest vis-à-vis Moscow should not leave the impression that Armenian society is different or less pro-European than Georgian society.

Speaking more generally, the post-Soviet space is and will remain very diverse in all its sub-regions around Russia – Eastern Europe, the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia – while centripetal (integration) and centrifugal (breaking out) political, economic, social and cultural forces will continue to affect the 11 countries, including Russia's "allies".¹⁴⁶ The Kremlin takes an apparently uniform approach towards its CSTO and EAEU "allies", in the context of official integration for "mutual benefit". On the other hand, through bilateral

Moscow seeks to transform them into political vassals, i.e. mere extensions of Russia's economic space and respective military districts.

agreements Moscow seeks to transform them into political vassals, i.e. mere extensions of Russia's economic space and respective military districts. In addition, Moscow places great emphasis on the preservation of the status and influence of the Russian language and Russian culture among "allies".¹⁴⁷ However, the "allies" do not perceive real or expected benefits and advantages from their membership of the

¹⁴⁶ Russia directly neighbours just five of them, including two "allies", Belarus and Kazakhstan, and two countries that it has attacked, Georgia and Ukraine. Non-neighbours include two "allies", Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, and a poor client state, Tajikistan. The rest are countries in which the Kremlin has obvious difficulties imposing itself: oil- and/or gas-rich Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, as well as semi-dissident Moldova, which is separated from Russia by the Kremlin's fiercest enemy, Ukraine.

¹⁴⁷ In this context, the cultural element includes various aspects related to the shared Soviet past.

CSTO and EAEU, but rather Russian-imposed conditions and restrictions, and they sense Russia's almost total disregard and disrespect for their status as sovereign countries.

For now, Russia makes use of only one "frozen conflict" (Nagorno-Karabakh), in which it is not directly (militarily) involved, to keep an "ally" (Armenia) in Moscow's orbit. However, since 2014 Belarus and Kazakhstan have been increasingly concerned about Donbass-like scenarios in their border regions with Russia, which are heavily Russian populated. Both Belarus and Kazakhstan have taken certain steps to promote their national identity, and demonstrate willingness to strengthen their sovereignty. On the other hand, Western nations and organisations do not have straightforward and individually tailored strategies for the post-Soviet countries and sub-regions, especially the "allies", which seem to be largely neglected or abandoned. In addition, there are some remarkable inconsistencies in the Western approach – e.g. sanctions against Belarus, imposed continuously by the US but almost terminated by the EU.

Russia's aggressions against Georgia and Ukraine signalled to the West that the Kremlin does not tolerate further "defection" from the post-Soviet space, and stands ready to use military force in order to defend its interests and intervene against "coloured revolutions". Zapad 2017 made precisely that point. The West has signalled that it is not going to intervene militarily anywhere in the post-Soviet space, including Ukraine, but it has not employed sufficiently clear strategic messaging towards post-Soviet countries, including "allies", and Russia, regarding Western interests and intentions, and the employment of soft power.¹⁴⁸

Russia is continuously confrontational and escalatory in its relations with the West, and it demonstrates great sensitivity and irritation concerning the independent relations of its "allies" with the EU, NATO and the US. Thus, the Kremlin intends to deter and keep the West away, and further isolate its "allies". Russia

¹⁴⁸ Ukraine may receive Western (US) armaments for self-defence, but there is no presence of NATO troops on its soil (anything comparable to the Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic states and Poland), as it is not a member of the Alliance.

signals that Western “interference” with the “allies” is “provocative”, and will bring nothing but trouble. The West does not remind the Kremlin that it is entitled to have cooperative relations with Russia’s “allies”, just as Russia has bilateral relations and interests concerning virtually all EU and NATO member states.

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Russia’s main instruments for keeping its “allies” under sufficient control are subsidies generated through supplies of relatively cheap energy (hydrocarbons), the income of “allies” from energy export transit tariffs (Belarus) or their dependence on energy exports through Russia (Kazakhstan), military integration and collective defence, and the information space dominated by the Kremlin’s propaganda machine. In this context, the West has rather limited possibilities to assist and influence Russia’s “allies”. Nevertheless, it can help those countries to build stronger civil societies, educate Western-minded and friendly youth, promote the rule of law and private entrepreneurship (especially small and medium-sized businesses), and develop trade relations with Western countries. In other words, the West could offer Russia’s “allies” better opportunities to develop and modernise their societies and economies, on an evolutionary

In the long run, Russia will do everything possible to obstruct and compromise the relations of its “allies” with the West, and force them into relative isolation.

rather than revolutionary path, without questioning or challenging their relationships with Moscow, and – most importantly – their internal stability and political choices.

In the long run, Russia will do every-thing possible to obstruct and compromise the relations of its “allies” with the West, and force them into relative isolation. The Kremlin would interfere directly or indirectly in these relationships with the desire to demonstrate or imply that the “allies” are unreliable partners and not capable of making and implementing independent decisions and policies.

The economic dimension seems to be the ultimate determining factor of whether the Kremlin will be able to sustain its policy. Russia largely fails to fulfil the expectations of its “allies” in terms of subsidies and investments, which are particularly important for Belarus and Armenia. On top of that, the Kremlin shows disrespect for the sovereignty of the “allies”. The natural reaction of the “allies” is to balance Moscow’s influence and pressure by forging and developing relations with third actors, including Western nations and organisations.

The West does not remind the Kremlin that it is entitled to have cooperative relations with Russia’s “allies”, just as Russia has bilateral relations and interests concerning virtually all EU and NATO member states.

The West could look into the future beyond 2024, which would likely be a post-Putin, post-Lukashenko and post-Nazarbayev new era. If Russia’s economic situation does not improve dramatically, the Kremlin will have to “share” its “allies” with Europe/the West, China and Middle Eastern actors, including Iran. The Kremlin will have especially great difficulties to balance, not to mention countering Chinese economic expansion in Kazakhstan and the whole of Central Asia.

In the nearest terms, in anticipation of and preparation for Vladimir Putin’s re-election for a fourth presidential term, Russia will attempt to exert demonstratively additional pressure against its “allies”, particularly Belarus, in order to “straighten out relations”. Russia

dictates to Belarus precise and stringent conditions that it expects Minsk to obey without qualification. Consequently, each “ally” should assume a specific set of Russian conditions and demands. In these circumstances, under increasing pressure from Moscow, the “allies” would seek – even if not always sincerely – more active relations with and recognition by the West. The “allies” would be further motivated to accept reasonable and clear Western terms for political recognition, economic aid/projects/programmes, and certain highly valued “bonuses” (e.g. over travel).

The obvious recommendation, which would be in line with the general opinion of many Western experts and politicians, is to practically continue to ignore Russia’s “allies”, i.e. to continue to

The natural reaction of the “allies” is to balance Moscow’s influence and pressure by forging and developing relations with third actors, including Western nations and organisations.

cooperate and do business with them in limited ways, with modest aims and very cautiously. This approach would suggest that more active relations between the West and the “allies”, countries that were “lost” many years ago, would inevitably be considered by Moscow as a direct provocation, and will spark unnecessary conflicts. In addition, the West simply would not have anything relevant to gain. Instead, the West should concentrate on Ukraine (and Georgia), forget about Belarus and Armenia, and develop only strictly business relations with Kazakhstan.

The “allies” would be further motivated to accept reasonable and clear Western terms for political recognition, economic aid/projects/programmes, and certain highly valued “bonuses” .

However, this report suggests, on the contrary, adopting a different attitude. The West should try

to find more efficient ways to engage in dialogue and develop ties with Russia’s “allies”, preparing the ground for stable and friendly relations in a longer-term perspective. The relationships should be transparent and clearly defined in terms of mutual and realistic expectations.

The West should try to find more efficient ways to engage in dialogue and develop ties with Russia’s “allies”, preparing the ground for stable and friendly relations in a longer-term perspective.

Strategic messages should also be clear to Russia: the West does not intend to antagonise or provoke the Kremlin, but only to have normal and open relations with the “allies”, just as Russia is entitled to have bilateral relations with any NATO/EU country. CSTO and EAEU members Belarus, Armenia and Kazakhstan, as sovereign nations (after all, they are also members of the Commonwealth of *Independent States*), have the right to develop their foreign relationships. The West does not wish to interfere in the internal political systems of Russia’s “allies”, to provoke “coloured revolutions” or to induce them to switch alliances. There is no Western “hidden agenda”. These considerations should be clearly emphasised.

There is no Western “hidden agenda”.

Therefore, in order to build steadily closer relations with Russia’s “allies”, the West should:

- Conduct regular bilateral and multi-lateral consultations with each “ally”, with the aim of identifying and charting the issues of real interest to all sides. The EU and NATO should state their readiness to cooperate in ways that strengthen the sovereignty of the “allies”.

- Design a largely harmonised approach for projecting Western soft power in all post-Soviet countries, including Russia’s CSTO and EAEU “allies”, according to local and regional specificities. There should be no “red lines” between Belarus and Ukraine or Armenia and

Georgia but, rather, opportunities for increased economic, cultural and military cooperation.

The EU and NATO should state their readiness to cooperate in ways that strengthen the sovereignty of the “allies”.

- Adopt, both in the EU and NATO, separate strategies for post-Soviet countries in Eastern Europe (including Belarus), the Caucasus (including Armenia) and Central Asia (including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), putting the emphasis on sub-regional cooperation with Western technical support and financial assistance. Appropriate formats should be established, at the highest possible level, for dialogue and cooperation with Russia’s “allies”, individually and in their respective sub-regional context.

There should be no “red lines” between Belarus and Ukraine or Armenia and Georgia but, rather, opportunities for increased economic, cultural and military cooperation.

- Elaborate and implement more ambitious projects with “allies” concerning cross-border cooperation and border control, the fight against corruption and organised crime, development of civil society, trade relations and transport routes, as well as other relevant soft-security topics. Military-to-military contacts should be encouraged, as well as mutual observation of military exercises, and participation of “allies”, as appropriate, in NATO-led exercises. The EU and NATO have already made efforts in many of these areas, but their efforts need to be more ambitious, effective and visible to the recipients (including local populations).
- Make the rules of the game very clear. The “allies” need to demonstrate responsibility and accountability for the Western assistance that they receive, which should also enjoy appropriate visibility in the respective countries. The West should consider substantially larger assistance packages to the “allies”, depending on their readiness to cooperate and meet the rules of the game.

Vicious circles (e.g. “no financial support given unless reforms are made” as opposed to “reforms cannot be made without financial assistance”) should be avoided through appropriate agreements and the gradual implementation of reforms/projects.

- Design the standards for cooperation according to local conditions and specificities, particularly in the case of Central Asia. The respective models should be realistic with respect to local populations and their expectations. Set demands concerning Western liberal democratic values at a “Goldilocks” level, not necessarily corresponding to requirements presented to countries that aspire to EU/NATO membership.
- Build trade relations by also offering to Russia’s “allies” export opportunities to the West. Support their small and medium-sized enterprises (start-ups), and invest in their key economic sectors. Conclude agreements and demand internal legislation that protects Western ownership and investments.
- Develop cooperation in the political-military sphere, including between NATO and the respective “allies”. NATO is not a taboo for the “allies”, and neither should the “allies” be one for NATO. The conduct of continuous dialogue is the best way to build and sustain friendly relations. NATO should propose to Belarus the opening of a liaison office in Minsk.

Finally, it should be reckoned that initiatives undertaken vis-à-vis individual “allies” (and their neighbours) might evolve at different speeds and with different levels of success. Nevertheless, cooperation with the “allies” is worth trying, as long as they are interested, receptive and making progress. The most important achievement would be to create mutual trust and (particularly in the case of Belarus) to improve the image of the West among the local population.

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