



THE EUROPEAN UNION IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

A large, semi-transparent blue globe centered on the European continent, set against a dark blue background. The globe shows the outlines of continents and oceans.

# EU and Russian Hegemony in the 'Shared Neighbourhood'

Between Coercion, Prescription,  
and Co-optation

★★★★★

Isabell Burmester

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ISSN 2662-5911 ISSN 2662-592X (electronic)  
The European Union in International Affairs  
ISBN 978-3-031-75487-6 ISBN 978-3-031-75488-3 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-75488-3>

This work was supported by Schweizerischer Nationalfonds zur Förderung der Wissenschaftlichen Forschung (199615) and Jean Monnet Network on Research and Teaching in EU Foreign Affairs (NORTIA Scholarship).  
Published with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation

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*To Annelies*

## PREFACE

This book is the product of more than six year of research. Much has changed in the years since the start of this endeavour in 2017 and the EU's Eastern neighbourhood looks very different today than it did then. Whilst the idea to compare the EU and Russian power projection in the region seemed unwarranted in 2017, it has become highly relevant in the context of Russia's escalated war in Ukraine and its ripple effects on the perceptions of Russia and the EU in the populations of the Eastern neighbourhood and beyond. Shedding light on the legitimacy of the parallel hegemonic orders and the respective exercise of hegemonic power by the two actors, it provides insights into the longer developments in this regional order that led to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

However, the tumultuous events of the last years have also complicated the research process. Extensive field research was essential for the completion of this project, but has been heavily impacted by travel restrictions amid the COVID crisis, the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh and the Russian full-scale invasion. After conducting interviews in Brussels in 2019 and in Moldova in February 2020, I was unable to travel to Armenia and Russia as planned. Armenia had closed its borders to foreign tourists until September 11, 2020. Then, the second Nagorno-Karabakh War broke out on September 27, 2020. Russia had also closed its borders and was not issuing visas in 2020. I was awarded a doc.mobility grant from the Swiss National Science Fund (SNSF) in November 2020 for a

12-month stay at MGIMO University (Moscow State Institute of International Relations) in Moscow. Due to the closure of the Russian borders I was only able to start my stay in Moscow on September 1, 2021, which was interrupted six months later by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Considering these difficult circumstances, I am all the more grateful for the support I received over these last seven years. I would like to thank the Swiss National Science Fund (SNSF), the NORTIA Jean Monnet Network, the Fondation Ernst et Lucie Schmidheiny, the Académie Suisse des sciences humaines, and the Société Académique de Genève for the financial support. This book results (in parts) from research conducted at the Global Studies Institute and the Department of Political Science and International Relations of the University of Geneva, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of Maastricht University, and the Centre for Eurasian and Russian Studies (CEURUS) at Tartu University. I am grateful to my colleagues and the administrative staff at these institutions for providing an excellent working environment. I'd also like to express my deepest gratitude to my interviewees in Brussels, Moscow, Moldova, and Armenia for their time and availability. Without their openness and willingness to answer my questions, this book would not exist. A special thanks goes to my friend Mariam for making my stay in Yerevan so productive and memorable. I would also like to thank Alina and Olga for being such excellent teachers and guiding me through the intricacies of the Russian language.

I would like to thank my colleagues—many of whom have become friends—for their support and constructive criticism. Special thanks go to Sandra Lavenex, Laure Delcour, Gergana Noutcheva, and Didier Péclard. Lastly, I would like to thank Vincent Della Sala and the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence on Geopolitics in EUrasia for allowing me to finalise this book in the beautiful surroundings of Trento in Northern Italy.

Trento, Italy  
July 2024

Isabell Burmester



*Competing Interests* The author has received a research grant from the Swiss National Science Fund (Grant 199615) and has no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this book.

*Ethics Approval* This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Geneva (4 September 2019/CER-SDS-18-2019). Informed consent to participate and to publish was obtained from individual participants.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Isabell Burmester** is a post-doctoral researcher at the Sorbonne Nouvelle University in Paris. Currently, she is a researcher on the EU-funded REUNIR project investigating how the EU can strengthen its foreign and security toolboxes to bolster the resilience and transformation of (potential) candidate countries. For her next project (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation) she will spend one year at Stockholm University to analyse the responses of International Organisations to Russian norm contestation. Her work is situated at the intersection of international relations and area studies with a focus on international and regional hegemony in Eastern Europe and Eurasia.

# ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Association Agreement
AC	<i>Consiliul Audiovizualului</i> (Moldova's Audiovisual Council)
ANSA	<i>Agencia Națională pentru Siguranța Alimentelor</i> (Moldova's National Food Safety Agency)
AP	Action Plan
BSE	Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy
CAQDAS	Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CEPA	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
CU	Customs Union
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
EAC	Eurasian Conformity Mark
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EEAS	European External Action Service
EFSA	European Food Safety Authority
ENA	Electric Networks of Armenia
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union

EUBAM	European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GMO	Genetically Modified Organism
GOST	<i>Gosudarstvennyy Standart</i> (System of Government Standards)
GSP	Generalised Scheme of Preferences
GSP+	Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus
HACCP	Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points
IR	International Relations
JCC	Joint Control Commission in Transnistria
LIO	Liberal International Order
MFA	Macro-Financial Assistance
MOC	Moldovan Orthodox Church
OGRF	Operational Group of Russian Forces
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PCA	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement
PMR	Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic
PTA	Preferential Trade Agreement
RASFF	Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed
ROC	Russian Orthodox Church
Rospotrebnadzor	Russian Trade and Sanitary Inspection Authority
Rossotrudnichestvo	Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation
SanPin	Sanitary and Veterinary Norms
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise
SPS	Sanitary and Phytosanitary
SVC	Scientific and Veterinary Committee
TBT	Technical Barriers to Trade
TR	Technical Regulation
VLAP	Visa Liberalisation Action Plan
WTO	World Trade Organisation



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# Introduction: Russia’s War in Ukraine and the “Shared Neighbourhood” in a Historical Context

On the eve of 21 February 2022, I sat in my apartment in Moscow watching Russian President Vladimir Putin do the unthinkable: After eight years of military conflict, he recognised the “independence and sovereignty” (Putin 2022a) of the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Lugansk People’s Republic in Eastern Ukraine. Three days later, he announced a special military operation to protect the people living in the two republics and “defend Russia and our people” (Putin 2022b), launching the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In Moscow, where I had arrived for a visiting fellowship six months earlier, this escalation of Russia’s war in Ukraine had been inconceivable.

I had been studying the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood for ten years, trying to understand the complex processes that were underway in the countries of the former Soviet Union, which had decided to pursue the path of European integration. When I visited Kyiv for the first time in April 2013 with a group of International Relations (IR) students, we met with Ukrainian and foreign officials, politicians, and civil society to discuss Ukraine’s reform progress. After the Orange Revolution and the start of the negotiations of the Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union (EU), Ukraine had adopted a series of democratic and institutional reforms and our interlocutors were very optimistic about the conclusion of the AA. Seven months later, the president announced that Ukraine would not sign the agreement with the EU. Protests against

this decision erupted across the country. The movement's demands—rule of law and democracy in their country—were not directly related to the signing of the AA but associated with European integration and the EU model. They were also defined in opposition to Russia. It became clear that different policies and forms of government were associated with the EU and Russia. On Kyiv's main square, the dominance of EU ideas and democratic values became visible during the protests. EU flags were prominently displayed, and the movement became known as *Euromaidan*. This influence stood in stark contrast to Russia's threats and financial incentives to get Ukraine to abandon its European ambitions.

Together with Ukraine, three other countries had negotiated an AA: the Republics of Moldova and Armenia, and Georgia. All three countries experienced similar pressure from Moscow to refrain from signing the agreement. The AA included a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) that was incompatible with joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Russia had been advancing the Eurasian integration process with the establishment of a Customs Union (CU) in 2010 and in 2014 signed the Treaty on the EAEU with Belarus and Kazakhstan. If a country is member of a Customs Union, it agrees to abolish customs duties with the other members of the Union and to apply a common external tariff in its trade with third countries. This common external tariff means that the country cannot individually decide to reduce tariffs or form a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with countries or trade blocs that are not a member of the CU. That is why membership in the EAEU was incompatible with the EU AA/DCFTA. In an effort to get its Eastern and Southern neighbours to abandon the AA/DCFTA and to join the EAEU instead, the Russian government issued threats and incentives to these governments.

The Moldovan government also faced pressure from Moscow. This pressure came in the form of economic incentives and trade restrictions. But the government decided against complying with Russian wishes. When the AA with the EU was signed in 2014, Russia imposed retaliatory trade bans as a punishment. After its ratification by all EU member states and Moldova, the AA came into force in 2016. In 2017, under president Igor Dodon, Moldova also became an observer state to the EAEU. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the pro-European government submitted an application for EU membership. Moldova was granted EU candidate status in June 2022 and in December 2023 the EU decided to open accession negotiations. At the same time, the Moldovan government

withdrew from multiple treaties signed with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and announced its intention to entirely withdraw from the organisation.

Armenia was in a more vulnerable position compared to Moldova. Due to its conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, the country depended on Russia as a security ally. In 2013, Putin signalled Russian support for Azerbaijan in order to deter the Armenian government from signing the AA with the EU. Following a meeting in Moscow, Armenia's President Serzh Sarkisian announced the decision to join the EAEU, thereby effectively cancelling the signing of the AA/DCFTA. In 2017, in an effort to continue cooperation, Armenia and the EU signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The agreement included provisions on political association similar to the ones that had been negotiated for the AA. But due to the incompatibility with Armenian membership in the EAEU CU, the CEPA did not include an FTA. After its defeat in the escalated war over Nagorno-Karabakh—during which Russia played the role as a mediator rather than an Armenian ally—the Armenian government announced its withdrawal from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and a potential application for EU membership.

Georgia's relations with Russia had been strained by the 2008 war in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Efforts were made to normalise relations and in 2013 Russia issued positive incentives rather than threats to prompt the government to not sign the AA. Most notably, Moscow lifted an embargo on Georgian wine that had been established in 2006. Together with Ukraine and Moldova, Georgia signed the EU AA in 2014. However, since 2020, the country has regressed in terms of democratic principles and political commitments to the EU. The situation worsened after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. When Georgia submitted its EU membership application alongside Ukraine and Moldova in 2022, the EU raised concerns over Georgia's commitment to the EU's values and standards, in particular democracy and the rule of law. While the European Council expressed its readiness to grant Moldova and Ukraine candidate status in the June 2022 Council conclusions, Georgia's candidate status was made conditional on the fulfilment of twelve priorities. Ultimately, Georgia was also granted candidate status, but accession negotiations have not yet been initialised. At the same time, the Georgian government intensified its opposition to the EU and introduced a controversial law restricting foreign financing of NGOs. The law was inspired by

Russia's foreign agent law and, despite massive protests, was adopted in 2024.

These developments show that Russia's war against Ukraine is taking place in the broader context of a regional order in which the EU and Russia compete for influence. Both Putin's and Zelenskyy's discourse painted the picture of a systemic conflict between Russia and Europe (or "the West"), with Ukraine arguing that it belonged to the latter. In his addresses, Putin reiterated Russian concerns about NATO expansion and accused the "so-called collective West" of seeking "to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values" (Putin 2022b). One day after Russia had launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Zelenskyy stated that "this is not just Russia's invasion in Ukraine, this is the beginning of the war against Europe. Against the unity of Europe. Against elementary human rights in Europe" (Zelenskyy 2022).

This competition for influence between the EU and Russia grew over time through the development of their respective region-building policies and integration initiatives (Delcour 2018). It also impacted the foreign policies of the countries in their "shared neighbourhood", presenting both constraints and opportunities. Some of them adopted a "multi-vector foreign policy" balancing EU and Russian influence, which became increasingly difficult over time. At least until 2014, the Ukrainian government strategically manoeuvred between cooperation with the EU and Russia (Gnedina 2015). The annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in the Donbas by Russia-led Kyiv to cancel the relations with Russia, thereby effectively ending Ukraine's multi-vector foreign policy. Until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moldova also pursued a "dual alignment strategy" in which the ruling elite extracted benefits from both actors (Morar and Dembińska 2021, 294). Thus, what is currently happening in Ukraine needs to be understood in the context of the longer developments in this regional order (Sasse 2022).

To be able to understand EU and Russian influence today, it is essential to look at the historical legacies that enable (or constrain) this influence. In the next sections, I discuss the historical context of EU and Russian influence in the region. The discussion shows how the end of Russian/Soviet imperialism left in place the structures that enabled Russia to continue to exercise influence. The EU, on the other hand, created the context for its power projection through its enlargement and neighbourhood policy.



## 1.1 RUSSIA'S ROLE IN THE "POST-SOVIET" SPACE

Russia's relations with the countries in the region were marked by the history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. The expansion of the Russian Empire established centralised control over the nations and (nomadic) peoples living in Siberia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. This control continued during the Soviet Union, during which the periphery was subject to Moscow's political, economic, and cultural dominance. Thus, it is not surprising that Russian influence in the region today is analysed through the prism of (post-)imperialism (Buzgalin et al. 2016; Kushnir 2018) and Soviet legacy (Levada 2003). Moore (2001) even argued for an application of post-colonial theory to the *post-Soviet* societies.



Fig. 1.1 Map of South Eastern Europe in 1881 (Source Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin)