

Chapter 4

Eastern Europe's Challenge to Russian-Western Relations

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Twenty-five years after the crash of the Soviet Union and its geopolitical derivatives COMECON and the Warsaw Pact, which in turn led to the end of the bipolar world order, the globe has experienced a number of local conflicts of varying scale, and we now face a dangerous point of confrontation. Global institutions formed for a different era seem less relevant to this new age. The international order appears unable to cope with unprecedented turbulence in relationships between countries and regions. Political life in both new and old countries is marked by unprecedented instability. The forces of disintegration and destruction unleashed at the end of the 1980s challenge sovereignties and state authority. The rearrangement of territories and peoples that once comprised the space of the former Soviet bloc remains in flux and has not been acknowledged nor accepted by all.

This chaos can be stopped only by means of a new “post-bipolar rethinking,” or a reasonable consensus among the relevant parties. Unfortunately, this seems increasingly difficult due to the unwillingness of the main opponents—the United States and Russia—to reach a political compromise. Meanwhile, geographic and political gray zones are growing.

What must be done to stop further deterioration of the situation? First, the East–West dialogue must be reset. Second, effective mechanisms must be developed for joint settlement in “gray zones,” especially some kind of a common neighborhood policy for eastern Europe. Third, economic and social stability remains important in states—such as Russia—capable of influencing the situation in such gray zones.

All three elements are related; if one is not addressed, efforts in the other areas are likely to be in vain. Moreover, all of the gray zones encompass the space around Russia, thus endangering its own economic and political stability. It is enough to look at the geographical map to understand Russia's engagement and to understand that, on the one hand, Russia could

not afford the luxury of inaction—especially if we take into consideration that transfrontier regions everywhere are comprised of Russian-speakers, like in Crimea and Donbass, who often have Russian passports or, like in the Baltic states, non-citizen passports. On the other hand, Russia’s own domestic situation is an important determinant of the means it has chosen to address the dangers of instability surrounding it.

Of the three points mentioned above, the situation in Russia itself is of crucial importance. No pressure from the outside world can damage Russia’s domestic situation as much as a failure of vision and lack of political will for change inside the country.

Over the 25 years since the collapse of the USSR, no real breakthrough efforts at economic or political stabilization were undertaken, except that by the Yevgeny Primakov government after the default at the end of the 1990s. But that was only a brief effort, and was helped by very favorable oil prices.

Here is the paradox of the situation: if Russia did not react to violations of the rights of the Russian population in the near abroad, its policy would be doomed to condemnation domestically as well as among its compatriots abroad. If Russia does react—like it did after the 2014 winter and spring imprisonment of Russian activists in Ukraine—it is condemned at the international arena. From this point of view the situation looks irreparable.

The Central European Experience: Can it be Useful?

There is much in common between the processes that took place in central and in eastern Europe and those that took place in Russia. All underwent deep economic, social, and political transformations. But the processes in eastern Europe and Russia were more complicated, because in addition to these radical changes they had to establish their new statehoods within the borders acquired within practically one month by “joint efforts” of presidents Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Here arises the difference in central/east European relations with Moscow, and accordingly, in Moscow’s relations with them. Thus, although from the beginning they could be considered elements of one process—the collapse of the socialist system—very soon the paths of central and eastern Europeans separated. The decision of the central Europeans from the mentioned point of view had been clear: to adopt the standards of Western integration. Eastern

Europeans, on the other hand, continued for a quarter of a century to try to balance deeper ties with the West with efforts to remain with Russia.

For more than 20 years it has been clear to any professional analyst studying relations between Russia and central Europe that an unstable and disoriented Ukraine poses the major challenge to any effort to develop new forms of cooperation among Russia, its neighbors and the West.¹ Ukraine's chronic instability, aggravated by differences between two parts of the country that have been unable to reach consensus on major issues of statehood, has been a major challenge for East and West alike, and each side has sought to steer the country towards its own camp in a post-bipolar contest for influence.

The situation in central Europe, in contrast, had been stabilized beginning in the mid-1990s, due largely to the decision of those countries to join the European Union and NATO. Reform plans and road maps worked out by common regional and EU expert groups were critical to ensuring a relatively stable, comparatively quick, and ultimately successful transition of these countries toward the European mainstream.

Russia at that time was immersed in its own political and economic reforms, which—let us not forget—were being carried out by the Yegor Gaidar government in close consultation with U.S and other Western experts. They had no intention of including Russia in any integration community, nor did they have a vision for the future of the Russian Federation. Decommunization, deconstruction and massive privatization of state property were urgent orders of the day.

Given Russia's preoccupation with its own internal economic and political restructuring, central Europe ceased to be a major subject of concern. Moreover, following the dissolution of COMECON, Russia agreed to erase the significant debts accumulated by other COMECON countries vis-a-vis the Soviet Union as part of the bloc's various trade arrangements. Moscow had little interest, therefore, in stagnant economies, each facing its own economic challenges, and chose to look to more promising opportunities offered by new open markets emerging from the end of the Cold War.

In short, Russia's relations with central European states, having lost their political and economic glue, began to loosen and drift apart. Russia

¹ Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации. 28 июня 2000 г., http://www.ng.ru/world/2000-07-11/1_concept.html (5.02.2017).

watched its former allies reorient themselves to the West, but given relatively good relations with the West at the time of Boris Yeltsin, and flush with its own sense of opportunity following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow did not undertake any practical steps to block the pro-Western course of the central European states. The high water mark of this approach could be seen in Russia's foreign policy concept from the year 2000, in which only 3.5 lines were devoted to relations with central European countries—less than the space allocated to Russia's relations with African countries.²

Russia took a distinctly different approach, however, to countries of the former Soviet Union. Relations with countries of Commonwealth of Independent States remained a priority for all Russian governments during this period.

At the time, Western powers were keen not to irritate Russia. On the eve of accepting these countries into the European Union, several rounds of tripartite talks were held between the newcomer countries, the EU and Russia. They were elaborated in the documents signed by the Russian Federation and the European Communities and the Council of the European Union.³ As the documents show, the new acceding states adopted the major principles of relations between Moscow and Brussels as consolidated by them in 1994 and 1997.

It is important to mention that, by that moment, the Kremlin's relations with the West—especially Italy and Germany—had become much better than with the parting former allied socialist countries. The formulations of the documents signed in 2004 demonstrate understanding by Brussels about major Russian concerns at least as regards its trade and economic relations with the former COMECON countries:

EU also confirms that compensatory tariff adjustments accorded in the context of EU enlargement through modifications of the EU tariff schedule will be applied on an MFN basis to the advantage of Russian exporters.⁴

² Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации. 28 июня 2000 г. URL: http://www.ng.ru/world/2000-07-11/1_concept.html (5.02.2017)

³ Protocol to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement 2004, https://russiaeu.ru/userfiles/file/protocol_to_the_pca_2004_english.pdf; Joint Statement on EU enlargement and Russia-EU relations 2004, https://russiaeu.ru/userfiles/file/joint_statement_on_eu_enlargement_and_russia_eu_relations_2004_english.pdf

⁴ Joint Statement, *Ibid.*

Or the following:

Agreement has been reached to adapt the EU-Russia agreement on trade in certain steel products *to reflect traditional Russian exports to the acceding countries*.⁵ The purpose of the transitional special measures will be to prevent a sudden sharp negative impact on traditional trade flows.⁶

Even the details of transit to the Kaliningrad region of persons and goods had been addressed in the document to give Russia confidence that it faced no dangerous threats to its future economic well-being and security. The protocol, signed on the eve of the European Union's Eastern enlargement, contained very optimistic lines concerning the future of the European continent:

The EU and Russia reaffirm their commitment to ensure that EU enlargement will bring the EU and Russia closer together in a Europe without dividing lines, inter alia by creating a common space of freedom, security and justice.⁷

This belief grounded in the mutual work of Russian and EU experts on the document *Road Map on the Common Economic Space*,⁸ signed on May 10, 2005 in Moscow.

Thus, to a large extent both the NATO and EU membership of central European countries was achieved via consensus between East and West. The manner in which the issues were addressed generated a positive influence on the overall development of relations between central European countries and Russia.

The tenor of the times was illustrated by remarks by Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Avdyeev at a 2001 conference at the Russian Academy of Sciences on "Russia and Central Europe in the New Geopolitical Realities."⁹ Avdyeev touted the revival of Russia's relations with the countries

⁵ Author's emphasis.

⁶ Joint Statement, op. cit.

⁷ Joint Statement, op. cit.

⁸ Road Map on the Common Economic Space. Approved on May 10, 2005, https://russiaeu.ru/userfiles/file/road_map_on_the_common_economic_space_2005_english.pdf.

⁹ Россия и Центральная Европа в новых геополитических реальностях. Сборник выступлений участников III международной научной конференции «Россия и Центральная Европа в но-

of central and eastern Europe¹⁰ and heralded new possibilities, particularly in economic relations, stating that “We are ready to follow this path in relations with eastern European countries as far as our partners themselves would be ready for this.” This formula, which was used by Russian officials at different levels, later on gave new impetus to a period of unprecedented growth in economic ties between Russia and central Europe.

These developments tracked with an overall positive turn in Russia–EU relations, including initiation at the 2003 St. Petersburg summit of the so-called “Four Spaces” of cooperation: 1) a common economic space; 2) a common space of stability, security and justice; 3) a common space of international security; 4) a common space for scientific research and education including cooperation in the cultural sphere. At the 2005 Moscow summit road maps for implementing the four projects were adopted. Within this frame there was ample room for central European countries to find their role and place. Good results were registered on all sides until 2006, when Poland blocked the signing of a new EU–Russia agreement and then introduced the Eastern Partnership program.

Was it good or bad that the West was so actively engaged in the shaping of a new central Europe? One can find both positives and negatives. Among the positives was the fact that as soon as Western capitals offered these countries a clear perspective of joining European and Euro-Atlantic structures, they set forth clear conditions to make such integration possible, and helped the countries resolve a number of difficult territorial and other disputes.¹¹ Western leaders were forthright that joining European structures could only be possible when these countries met EU criteria in spheres ranging from the economy to justice and politics, and they offered road maps towards gradual achievement of these goals. Joining the West gave central European countries a feeling a partnership and security at a time of wars and conflict in neighboring regions, such as the former Yugoslavia, Transnistria and Chechnya. It also helped central Europeans to shape their own positive regional integration, as evidenced by the Visegrad group.

вых геополитических реальностях»/ под. ред. Л.Н.Шишлиной. М.: ИМЭПИ РАН, 2002, стр.18-19.

¹⁰ From 1990 until the mid-2000s the term “Central and Eastern Europe” was used in Russia for the countries of current central Europe, although sometimes the term Eastern Europe was used.

¹¹ Nationalistic slogans had been among the drivers of crushing the socialist system in this part of Europe.

On the other hand, all of these initiatives were realized at a cost: some national interests were surrendered as traditional domestic industries were challenged, former eastern markets were lost, and central Europeans found themselves confronted with such modern European problems as loss of jobs, migration of the most capable work force, and heightened social inequality. They felt compelled to participate in military actions far beyond their own territories and distant from Europe. Today they find themselves bound by such European rules as the need to accept quotas on migrants.

On balance, however, the clear majority of central Europeans prefer being members of the EU than being left outside it. Of course the absence of an alternative economic-social model of integration is an important factor, given that the previous model ceased to exist in the late 1980s and that the questions of membership in new Eurasian structures has never been on the agenda for these countries. Since the dissolution of the two market integrations in Europe towards the end of the 1980s, there has been no alternative to EU integration. The projects of CIS and EAES, as well as all intermediate uniting plans, which over the past 25 years have been pushed by Moscow, Minsk, and Astana, never became functional. For central European countries there was only one path—that of integration into successfully functioning Western integration communities.

Perhaps the most effective Russian proposal for trans-European integration was made by Pjotr Savicky, a Russian geopolitician of the 20th century and one of the founders of the Russian school of Continental geopolitics. Savicky advocated for a transcontinental integration plan that would connect its two fragments: integration of countries around Berlin and integration of countries around Moscow.¹² Who knows how the history of the world might have changed if not for one crucial point: the lack of an effective and stable Moscow-oriented integration.

Currently we see how the countries of the region, especially the Visegrad four, are changing their initial perceptions of Western integration. As the outer border of the European Union, they have currently turned into a first line of defense against waves of humanity clamoring to enter Europe, many of whom are suffering refugees, but who also include terrorists and criminals of all shades. Hungary and Poland had to withstand serious and persistent attacks from Brussels on their efforts to make independent political and economic decisions. The migration crisis may mark the beginning

¹² Пётр Савицкий. Очерки международных отношений // Пётр Савицкий. Континент Евразия. М., Аграф, 1997. Стр.396.

of a new dynamic within the EU, in which the Brussels bureaucracy and older EU member states will need to listen to the concerns and experience of new member states in central Europe and, at least from time to time, to accept their view of a given situation. These countries today border highly turbulent regions. They cannot afford to wait until Brussels hears them. They must act, otherwise it could be too late for them.

In sum, one important historical lesson is that central European states have tended to seek integration within a community wider than their own national borders, yet have found it difficult to live with outside strictures, whether those are from the East or the West. So learning to live with this region is a great art in itself.

The Challenges of the Eastern Partnership Program

The situation in Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus has become greatly concerning for Europe, and particularly for the countries of the Visegrad group. These three countries are not only the Visegrad group's direct neighbors, they are—with the exception of Belarus—unstable and divided countries and at the same time neighbors of Russia, sharing a Russian population, tied deeply to the Russian market and economy, using Russian as a major language and, in the case of Belarus, sharing a common Western border and defense potential as well as a quite nominal "Union" state of Russia and Belarus.¹³

During the last 25 years the former Soviet republics countries faced great challenges from both the West and the East. On one hand, they had to adapt to new geopolitical and geoeconomic realities. On the other hand, they had to preserve old economic ties and markets as the only real source of revenue and economic vitality. When the Soviet economy collapsed, modernization took place to their west, while their markets, cultural, and ethnic ties remained firmly centered in the east. Countries such as Moldova and Ukraine, which historically had been part of Western neighboring countries, made cautious forays towards the West. Belarus and Azerbaijan, on the other hand, sought tactical balances that have proved to be rather profitable.

The Eastern neighborhood policy—establishing relations between the enlarged European Union with its new eastern neighbors, had turned into

¹³ See documents of the Union state: <http://eng.soyuz.by/>.

a serious call for the European Union in 2000–2001, after the decision on enlargement had been adopted at the Nice summit. It first materialized in 2003 in the form of the EU's Eastern neighborhood policy, and then in 2009 as the Eastern Partnership program.

Neither of these programs, and especially the Eastern partnership policy, generated positive relations with Russia. We can even confirm that the launch of the Eastern neighborhood program correlated with a general worsening of EU relations with Russia. Was it a strange coincidence? Or was it the start to establishing an eastern border of the European Union?

The new EU member states overloaded the EU with issues related to Russia that they insisted must be settled, but which they could not solve bilaterally.¹⁴ In 2006 Poland vetoed a new agreement between Russia and the European Union. According to some Russian experts on EU relations, this move—although initially treated as a mere technical obstacle¹⁵ to developing dialogue—“not only became a serious problem for Russia–EU relations, but was also a symptom of a progressive disease affecting the EU's political mechanism.”¹⁶ The disease was caused by the EU's eastern enlargement, which had rendered the European Union too diverse and meant that achieving agreement was more difficult. After 2004, some of the former USSR republics (Georgia, Moldova, Lithuania) felt it appropriate to share their personal hostility towards the USSR with the “European family,” thus obliging it “to defend” the republics against Russia.¹⁷

After Poland's claims had been settled, Lithuania was next, vetoing the new EU–Russia agreement anew on account of “post-Soviet” claims against Moscow. As a result the EU had to delay the agreement until the time would be right. Unfortunately the time is still not right. In 2009 the EU took definite steps to freeze relations with Russia because of Russian involvement in the military conflict on the border of North and South Ossetia (Georgia).

¹⁴ For more, see Lyubov Shishelina, “Russia's View of Relations with European Union and the Visegrad Group,” *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, Vol. XXIV, No 1-2/2015, pp.66-83.

¹⁵ Russia had refused to import Polish chicken on sanitation grounds.

¹⁶ D. Danilov, “Rossija—ES: osobennosti politicheskogo dialoga,” [Russia–EU: features of political dialogue], in O. U. Potjemkina, ed., *Evropejskij sojuz v XXI veke: vremja ispytanij* [European Union in the twentieth century: testing times], Moscow: Vec mir, 2012, p. 538.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

By the end of the first decade of the new century, the Eastern Partnership had become more important to the EU.¹⁸ The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared the Eastern Partnership to be an unfriendly gesture, contradicting the spirit of good relations between the EU and Russia, and forcing former Soviet republics to choose between two different types of integration. In the spring of 2010, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared that the Eastern Partnership could damage relations between Russia and Partnership countries, especially the integration structures formed within the CIS: “Moscow sees the Eastern Partnership as an attempt to weaken Russian influence in the post-Soviet space and offer former Soviet republics a different development model.”¹⁹

Lavrov’s concerns were in response to various EU statements suggesting such a trade-off. As early as 2003 the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs, Human Rights, Common Security and Defence Policy noted in a report that “the projected establishment of a Common Economic Space together with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan could hamper further cooperation between Ukraine and the EU.”²⁰ Thus, even before the European Neighbourhood Policy was shaped, Ukraine was deliberately forced to choose between Brussels and Moscow, although the economic welfare of millions of its citizens still depended on interaction with Russia. The report went on to state that:

Ukraine by virtue of its size, geographical location, deep historical, cultural, economic, and other links to Central and Western Europe, as well as to Russia and its potential to become an even more valuable partner of the EU in essential areas, must be given a particularly important role in the context of the EU’s Wider Europe-Neighbourhood policy.²¹

¹⁸ Nonetheless, this was a very positive period in economic relations between Russia and the European Union. The second half of the 2000s might be considered a time of extensive alternative gas and oil pipeline construction directing attention away from important political issues.

¹⁹ *RIA Novosti materials*, May 13, 2010. <http://www.rian.ru>, accessed July 29, 2015.

²⁰ Report on “Wider Europe—Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours”. COM (2003) 104—2003/2018(INI). Committee on Foreign Affairs, Human Rights, Common Security and Defence Policy // European Parliament 1999–2004 Session document. Final A5-0378/2003. November 5, 2003, p. 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The European Union therefore “supports Ukraine’s desire for EU integration.” It is notable that Ukraine’s link with Europe (including Western Europe) is placed above its links with Russia.

On the eve of the 2013 Vilnius summit, EU–Russia relations were quite positive in the economic sphere, but less so politically.²² One assumption about Russian integration policy, or rather the lack of visible results in this direction, might be that Russia itself was delaying closer integration with Asian countries and still saw better prospects in resuming its European dialogue. However, some analysts state that Russia had set its main hopes on the possibility of engaging in two integration processes in the post-Soviet region—the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union, and constructing a free trade zone at the point where they intersected.

From this point of view, the worsening relations between Russia and the EU on the eve of the November 2013 summit and the fact that the Association Agreement with Ukraine was not signed in Vilnius, could have been viewed as a no-joy result of cooperation, but was in fact concurrence of Russia and EU on post-soviet space. This might be called “a zero sum game”: Russia was defending its “sphere of privileged interests,” and the European Union “its circle of friends.” As Russian expert Olga Potjemkina puts it, “The latter sounds more elegant, but both are one and the same.”²³

This lack of political culture at the current stage of dialogue between Brussels and Moscow, intolerance, and a lack of responsibility for the fate of the region and continent as a whole were fully manifest on the eve of the Vilnius summit and during preparations for the Association Agreement with Ukraine. It would not be an exaggeration to state that one of the main triggers of the Ukrainian political crisis was the EU’s Eastern Partnership Policy. The European Union did not invite Russia to discuss the prospect of joining the economic talks, while Russia was ready to extend EU–Russian plans to create four common areas linking Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The EU had provided these new countries with restructuring plans that would widen the gap between them and Russia. Thus, these countries, geographically located between

²² By then Russia had become the EU’s third trade partner after the United States and China. In 2012–2013 Russia’s trade output with the European Union reached 49.7 percent. O. Potjemkina, “Rossija i Evropejskij sojuz: k edinomu prostranstvu ot Atlantiki do Tihogo okeana,” [Russia and the European Union: a common space from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean] *Русский вопрос* [Russian Issues], No. 3, 2013. <http://www.russkiivopros.com/index.php?page=one&id=530&kat=6&cs1=63>, accessed July 29, 2015.

²³ *Ibid.*

Russia and the EU, had been transformed from potential areas of cooperation into areas of confrontation and instability.

The response, from Russia's perspective, was Russian reintegration of Crimea—a final signal to the West following the collapse of the agreement achieved in Kyiv through Russian mediation on February 21, 2014. To understand and evaluate the one-sided concessions Russia has made since 1991 it is worth looking at the map of Europe and counting the areas of former Russian influence given up within a quarter of a century in a spirit of good will.

There remains the question whether the European expert community, driven by the euphoria of a quarter of a century of Russian concessions, failed to understand that there was a limit or breaking point to Russia's patience, or was deliberately seeking to draw Russia into confrontation. Perhaps the answer is that those in the West responsible for the strategy (as also happens sometimes in Russia) did not follow the signals coming from serious regional analysts about the importance of Ukraine for Russia.²⁴ Hungarian diplomat Janos Terenyi, for example, from the very start of the program had been aware that the Eastern Partnership policy puts the European Union into a serious conflict with Russia.²⁵

I shall not quote here figures underscoring the economic and humanitarian interdependence of the former USSR republics before the Vilnius summit of the Eastern Partnership, which in fact became a watershed between the “world of yesterday” and “the world today.” But they would support the point that Russia had good reason to be anxious about, and ultimately resist, a westward reorientation of Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus. Currently the number of registered migrants from the former Republics constitutes about 4 million people, and unofficially more than 10 million. Moldovans, Ukrainians, and Armenians occupy the first lines among job seekers arriving to Russia from abroad. They also post the largest sums of remittances to their countries from Russia.²⁶

²⁴ For example, Juraj Marusiak, “Russia and the Visegrad Group—More Than a Foreign Policy Issue,” *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, Vol. XXIV, No 1-2/2015, pp. 28-46.

²⁵ Keleti Partnerség: terjeszkedés Oroszország felé. *KITEKINTŐ*. 20.05.2009. URL: http://kitekinto.hu/karpat-medence/2009/05/20/szines_tarsasag_kopogtat_az_eu_kapujan/#.UofHe9JdVtU (in Hungarian).

²⁶ А.Кошкина, А.Баринов «Россия—не место для труда и Отдыха»/ Профиль № 41 (974), 2016. С.33.

What to Do?

We are currently at a threshold: either to continue the current confrontation or to stop and try to find a way out. If we chose the latter, then let us try to reevaluate, from the distance of 25 years, what happened and why it happened the way it did. Thus, the starting point for a reevaluation should be the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s.

The destruction and chaos wrought by the cacophony of realignments and reforms that characterized that period led the countries of central Europe to address many issues that had been left unresolved over decades and to find a path towards the European mainstream. The same forces of disorder and confusion in eastern Europe, on the other hand, empowered populist extremists and entrenched vested interests who blocked reforms and reconciliation, leading to the turbulence and armed conflicts that grip this region today.

It is clear that such conflicts must be addressed, foremost those in Ukraine and Moldova—but who should do it? Should we stand aside and let these countries settle these disputes by their own means? They have been trying to do this for 25 years. Should the international community intervene? Should neighboring countries—the V4—engage once again, being already once the initiators of the Eastern Partnership policy? Or should we work out a special network for assistance in dampening down these conflicts?

From a geopolitical point of view, the major conflict is being developed in the geopolitical continental sphere between Russia and central Europe. So they should work out their vision of the probable solution. But this is in the narrow context. Besides, we should consider that the countries of central Europe in their foreign policies are restricted by subordination within the EU. In a wider context, both in Ukraine and Moldova we have characteristic features of a bigger-scale confrontation that could be defined as the clash of two systems of values, two geopolitical trends. So, the solution at the regional level might not be enough and need the inclusion of the European Union—which is lately more associated with Germany, especially after Brexit—and the United States, if after the current presidential elections its policy will follow the Euro-Atlantic trends.

If the European policy of the new U.S. administration remains unclear, some initial steps, such as talks between the newly elected US president Trump with the presidents of Russia and Ukraine, have left Moscow and

Kyiv with some hope. Now that the Minsk process has entered the phase of a frozen conflict and cannot prove its effectiveness, perhaps some new positive signals could come from across the Atlantic?

Russia, representing the bordering country, the center of the Eurasian space, and a world power, thus is a part of all three proposed configurations of talks. Beginning with the lower—regional—level, a kind of scheme for settling the conflict became apparent during the Kremlin's talks with Moldova's newly elected president Dodon. He proposed to settle the Transnistria problem through the unification of Moldova, rather than via a federal solution that would grant special status to Tiraspol. This vision of a settlement corresponds with current Russian propositions and possibilities. The challenge, however, remains the intensive inner conflict between the pro-Russian presidential line in Moldova and the European inclinations of the cabinet of ministers. This deep political conflict does not add confidence to the determination of Transnistria to start realization of this plan of settlement immediately.

As to foreign policy trends in the European Union and Russia, the EU has stepped back a bit from the most far-reaching aspects of the Eastern Partnership, even though it began 2017 by granting visa-free regime to Georgia and in June 2017 granted visa-free travel to Ukraine. Russia, on the contrary, has continued to underscore the priority of moving ahead with initiatives to advance all levels of integration in the post-Soviet space.

For the moment, Russian ministries have not presented any constructive plans to realize such initiatives. Yet just as Brussels was keen on mediating with Russia during the accession of the central European countries to the EU in the early 2000s, Russia and the EU might also seek to find overlap in their partnership policies with regard to Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and the Caucasus. Such efforts could offer a serious chance both for reconciliation and for modernization of these gray zones and really pave the way towards an "integration of integrations." This has already been proposed under the program of the so-called "Four Common Spaces" between the European Union and Russia, until the one-sided policies of the Eastern Neighborhood and Eastern Partnership pushed broader EU-Russia considerations aside.

If the European Union and Russia could find their way back to constructive dialogue about common spaces, the conflicts in gray zones will eliminate themselves. The interest of each of these countries in joining such a broader effort would become an additional incentive for each of

them to stabilize the political situation in their country and to consider constructive administrative reforms that might include also federalization.

In short, the task for Russia and the United States is to revive and reset the dialogue, and the task for Russia and the European Union is to return to the idea of Four Common Spaces. The task for Russia and other neighboring countries (V4 among them) is to start the Common Neighborhood dialogue. And the task for Russia itself is to work out and to start deep and overwhelming economic reform for the benefit of the nation.

