



CONTESTING RUSSIA

PREPARING FOR THE LONG-TERM RUSSIAN THREAT

A REPORT BY THE U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION STAFF



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Letter of Transmittal
United States Congress
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Washington, D.C.
October 1, 2024

Dear colleagues:

Russia has emerged as one of the greatest threats to U.S. national security and prosperity in the world today. It has long engaged in a shadow war against the United States and our allies, using corrupt networks, sabotage, and assassinations to attack free societies. Since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it has massively escalated its efforts to overturn the U.S.-led global order, which has long inspired people around the world to choose freedom.

Russia is encouraging its fellow dictators in Tehran and Beijing to pursue a much more belligerent course and paving the way for such a course by working to undermine every international norm and ideal that has guaranteed stability in the aftermath of World War II. The free world's approach of the previous thirty years - to bind Russia into the global economic system, make Russian oligarchs wealthy, and treat Russia as an equal - has decisively failed. We are in a conflict we did not choose of dictators with rule of gun invading democracies with rule of law.

This report of the staff of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe lays out a blueprint for U.S. policy toward the European and Eurasian regions - the region of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) - that has at its center a realistic concept of Russia. Rather than viewing Russia as state in transition or, worse, a "fellow" great power, the United States must prepare for long-term contestation, understanding that Russia has a centuries-long history of violent imperialism toward its neighbors, Europe, and the world more broadly.

Putin's Russia will only stop its aggressive behavior when it is stopped. The hope for Russia that existed at the collapse of the Soviet Union must be exchanged for a recognition that Russia is unlikely to change in the near future and certainly will not until it is economically destitute, militarily weak, and pressure is applied from all angles to such an extent that true change – beyond simply switching one strongman for another – is demanded within Russia.

No one is more disappointed than I am that Russia has reached this juncture. I recall visiting Russia shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I saw the seeds of democracy and prosperity in the country, even if chaotic, and I genuinely believed that they would bloom. Many of us did. We maintained this hope for many years, ready to extend a hand to Russia. Sadly, this hand was slapped away again and again. But the United States did not wake up. We maintained a blind spot regarding Russia, believing Russia's own propaganda about itself. No longer. We must recognize Russia for what it is – a violent, revanchist force, that has reorganized itself to cause maximum chaos around the world. We must prepare for that.

There may come a day when true federalism will come to Russia, when Russia and Russians can recognize their own borders clearly and will not seek to colonize their neighbors or sow chaos elsewhere in the world. However, that is not this day. Today, we must organize ourselves to contest Russia in Europe, in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia. Malign Russian influence must be countered anywhere and everywhere in order that Americans are kept safe, our alliances are kept strong, and the U.S.-led global order that has enabled an unprecedented level of human freedom and prosperity is kept intact.

Sincerely,



Representative Joe Wilson
Chairman
U.S. Helsinki Commission

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia poses a serious and persistent threat to its neighbors, the United States, and the democratic world. Even if the country's current regime were to be replaced today, Russia would still face systemic obstacles to becoming a free and democratic state. Until Russia can reckon with its imperial history and present, cease using repression and corruption as tools of power, and build governing institutions that are grounded in respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, Russia cannot be a responsible international actor. We need to be prepared to contest Russia for the long term.

Ukraine defeating the Russian invaders is a necessary, but not sufficient, step towards not only forcing Russia into significant reflection and reform, but also towards uprooting Russian influence and countering Russian aggression more broadly. Ukrainian victory would preserve Ukraine's sovereignty as an independent, democratic state, while also stopping Russia from pursuing further conquest in the Visegrad 4, Baltics, Caucasus, and beyond. By fully empowering Ukraine to defeat Russia, the United States can demonstrate to countries who believe Russia is their best hope for protection and support that Russia is, in fact, a poor partner and that the United States and other democracies are more reliable.

Throughout Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea regions, which constitute the core portfolio of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, the United States must implement a comprehensive strategy to contest Russia. This process should include supporting and empowering our partners and allies who are on the front lines of countering Russian influence, offering economic and security arrangements that are viable alternatives to Russia's, and investing in institutions that hold Russia accountable.

In the Visegrad 4 and the Baltics, we should engage partners who have a shared history of Soviet occupation and a unique understanding of the Russia threat. This expertise should be leveraged and prioritized within NATO, the EU, and broader European leadership to strengthen collective defense.

In Central Asia, Russia's war on Ukraine has significantly shifted the geopolitical landscape, impacting the relationships between Central Asian countries and Russia and reshaping internal political and economic dynamics. These changes offer an opportunity for the United States to increase its engagement in the region to counter Russian influence and to support the efforts of Central Asian states to realign their foreign relations.

In the Western Balkans, Russia has preyed on internal divisions and flagging U.S. engagement to disrupt the region's integration into Western institutions, including NATO and the EU. The U.S. should target poisonous, Russia-affiliated actors in the region who engage in corrupt and destabilizing behavior while redoubling our support for regional security, stability, and energy independence.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has provided Türkiye with both challenges and opportunities, reshaping its relationships with Russia, the West, and countries within Central Asia. Should Türkiye's balancing act between Russia and NATO prove unsustainable in the long run, Ankara may be forced to choose sides more decisively, which could lead to either a stronger integration with the West or a pivot towards a more independent, and potentially more strained, foreign policy.

As the Caucasus stand at a pivotal moment in their history, the United States must update our understanding and assumptions to better align our approach to the democratic aspirations of people in the region and our strategic interests. By recalibrating our policies to account for the new realities on the ground, supporting democratic movements, and applying strategic pressure where necessary, the United States can help foster a more stable, prosperous, and independent South Caucasus.

To effectively counter the long-term threat posed by Russia in the Black Sea, the United States must adopt a comprehensive, sustained strategy that recognizes the Black Sea as a critical theater of competition. A long-term approach should prioritize building a credible deterrent to Russian aggression, supporting democratic governance and rule of law, and fostering regional cooperation frameworks that limit Russia's ability to exploit divisions and vulnerabilities.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), with its broad geographical participation and robust concept of security, has emerged as a unique platform for the United States to contest Russia, advance national and regional security priorities, reverse the region's democratic backsliding, ensure Russian accountability, and bolster allies like Ukraine. Russia's war against Ukraine and its hostility towards OSCE itself has prompted States to creatively reinvigorate how OSCE delivers on its mandates of democracy promotion and accountability.

Each of these regions and venues presents particular challenges to and opportunities for U.S. engagement. However, through persistent efforts geared towards fostering prosperity and democracy and countering Russia's authoritarian influence, we can minimize Russia's ability to threaten free societies. This report will provide a roadmap for minimizing and containing Russia's destructive behavior until internal forces necessary to fundamentally change Russia emerge.

RUSSIA

Russia will continue to be a problem for its neighbors, the United States, and much of the world. The nature of these problems depends on internal developments in the country, particularly the continued presidency of Putin and the status of the war on Ukraine. Even so, in the highly unlikely event that Putin dies or resigns tomorrow and Russia withdraws its troops from Ukraine's internationally-recognized borders, Russia has a very long way to go before it becomes a responsible international actor, or even a neutral presence in the world. Even in the best-case scenario in which Russia sheds its authoritarian model and its people opt for democracy in free and fair elections, the process of liberalization will be difficult and slow. We would be wise to avoid any 1991-style triumphalism a second time around. As with any country that the United States has an interest in seeing flourish (for the sake of both the international order and millions within the country living under authoritarianism), Russia will have to be held to strict account. This includes, first and foremost, securing appropriate reparations for Russia's destruction of Ukraine and accountability for war criminals.

In this report, we will make no specific predictions about Russia's future but will assume that in the coming years we will still have to contend with some level of bad behavior from Russia. Internal repression and external aggression go hand in hand, and therefore internal developments in Russia are highly relevant to U.S. foreign policy. Externally, there will be no hope for a peaceful and stable Russia while it remains engaged in war and occupation of its neighbors. This does not just encompass Russia's physical presence in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The propaganda and ideological dimensions of the war on Ukraine are particular obstacles to Russia's formation of a new and healthy national identity. Russia's official neocolonial policy of continuing to view Ukraine and other former Soviet republics and neighbors as its sandbox to play in whenever the mood strikes (or worse, as in Ukraine, as territory rightfully belonging to Russia) is the most significant obstacle to long-term peace and has been the justification for heinous crimes.

The following list constitutes a sampling of the internal obstacles to Russia's integration into the world and movement away from adversarial states like Iran, China, and North Korea. We will likely continue to contend with these obstacles for years, even in the unlikely case of a sudden positive transformation:

➤➤➤ **Corruption:** Corruption is baked into Russian business, politics, and everyday life. The Kremlin network of crime and patronage ensures that loyalty to the regime is rewarded and disloyalty is punished.¹ Thus, there are ethical and practical challenges to doing business with Russia—its largest enterprises in the military-industrial and natural resource sectors are directly or indirectly state-controlled. Russia’s war on Ukraine is funded in part by revenue from these enterprises, and the vast network of sanctions imposed on Russian industry is, as it should be, a challenge for trade partners to navigate even without considering corruption and the state’s heavy hand in the economy.

As we’ve seen in Ukraine, even democratic countries with a strong desire to root out legacy corruption face persistent obstacles. The process is slow and requires consistent bottom-up demands for accountability, which would require the protection of freedom of speech, assembly, etc. as much as top-down leadership and responsiveness on the issue. Given Ukraine’s challenges as a relatively new democracy seeking to integrate with western institutions, Russia will have an even longer road ahead to defeat corruption, starting without the many prerequisites that Ukraine already enjoys.

➤➤➤ **Fundamental Freedoms and Rule of Law:** Putin has subordinated the judiciary to his personal power in order to ensure his ideal outcomes, as punishments, as warnings, and to instill fear in the population. Russians are unable to publicly—and sometimes even privately if under surveillance—express opinions contrary to Kremlin narratives. Dissidents are targeted and branded as “foreign agents,” “extremists,” or part of “undesirable organizations,” each with serious legal ramifications. Anti-war protestors have been accused of treason. Journalists, artists, and average Russians making comments on social media have been fined, arrested, and convicted for exercising the freedoms supposedly guaranteed under the Russian constitution. In the tradition of internal repression leading to external aggression, Russia practiced and perfected these tactics on Russian citizens before using them to violently quash dissent in occupied Ukraine. The outcomes of trials in Russia and occupied Ukraine (especially those that are politically motivated) are decided in advance at the highest levels.

It has become extremely dangerous for foreigners accustomed to the benefits that the rule of law provides to engage in any way with Russia. There is no baseline assumption of “innocent until proven guilty” or a right to a fair trial. We have seen this with horrifying clarity with Russia’s hostage-taking of Americans, French, Germans, and others to hold them for use in swaps with the West. Though the most recent exchange in August led to the release of 3 U.S. citizens and others unjustly imprisoned, there are still in Russia sentenced to years in prison. Russia’s judiciary will not just need to be reformed—it will have to be completely rebuilt and a culture of rule of law developed where it traditionally has not existed.

➤➤➤ **Democracy:** There can be no change in Russia without free and fair elections. Elections in Russia have long been plagued with state-sponsored fraud; falsification of results; arbitrary restrictions on who may run for office to remove real political competition; changes to the constitution allowing Putin to remain president for long after his eligibility should have expired; and increasing centralization of power leading to far less say in the composition of regional and local governments. Russia must restore free and fair elections (to the extent they were present shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union) and develop a democratic culture—but this must be built on a foundation of free speech and assembly before honest elections are possible. As stated above, this is a hurdle on its own.

➤➤➤ **Energy Dependence:** Russia will continue to hold other countries hostage through its natural resource wealth—namely, by those countries who are dependent on Russia for oil, gas, nuclear material and energy infrastructure, and other major exports. Helping to diversify away from dependence on Russia could severely weaken the Russian economy, but the United States must provide countries with viable alternatives and convince them that dependence on Russia is not in their best interests.

➤➤➤ **Threats Abroad:** Russia's GRU and FSB serve as Putin's personal hit squads, involved in politically motivated poisonings, threats, surveillance, and assassinations in Russia and abroad. They operate at Putin's direction and with impunity in Russia. They are highly valued assets, as evidenced by Putin's willingness to trade numerous western hostages and Russian political prisoners for FSB hitman Vadim Krasikov, a convicted murderer in prison in Germany. These groups continue the horrific legacy of Soviet state security structures, whose members were responsible for the carrying out the death sentences of millions. Because no meaningful lustration took place after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian security services remain a clear and present danger to Putin's enemies in Russia and abroad.

➤➤➤ **Historical Memory and Propaganda:** The delivery of propaganda in Russia is facilitated by media censorship, largely state-controlled mass media, and persecution of independent journalists, activists, and academics who challenge the validity of state-promulgated narratives. Although with a bit of savvy, Russians can access independent media online, many Russians are isolated (some by choice) from any alternative sources of information that might challenge their thinking. Years of propaganda have served to whitewash the Soviet past, including the cult of the Great Patriotic War (WWII); rehabilitate Stalin; perpetuate the narrative that Russia is under attack by NATO and the West, making any policy defensible; and spread lies about Russia's war in Ukraine, including the devaluation of and hostility toward Ukrainian lives and nationhood—essentially a justification of genocide. No amount of liberalization in Russia will suddenly undo years of insidious propaganda, some of which is simply a new spin on old Soviet themes.

Even Russians who consider themselves free thinkers and seek out and read independent news will have to grapple with what this toxic environment has done to Russia as a culture and nation. Today's propaganda will continue to influence policy even beyond Putin.

None of these problems will be resolved quickly, and they necessitate fundamental changes in Russia, including leadership and the political will to overhaul informal and formal government and societal structures. Most importantly, Russia will not be able to decide its future without reckoning with the ugliest parts of its recent and more distant history. This is a tall order for any country coming out of autocracy and dictatorship. Failure to examine the Communist past and the persistence of these organs of repression and centralized power present a specific challenge. Russia's defeat in Ukraine would best initiate this process. This is not to say there is no hope for Russia--but the United States and its allies, as well as Russia's neighbors, must plan for a challenging if not still adversarial relationship in the years to come.

Russia's malign behavior has of necessity changed the nature of the U.S.-Russia relationship. Diplomatic ties are limited, the economic relationship with Russia is minor in the massive scheme of U.S. trade partnerships, and the Russian state has made a caricature of the United States and NATO into a catchall used to justify repression and violence. Even if the bilateral relationship is rightfully strained, the United States has an essential role to play in helping other countries lessen their dependence on Russia and combat its active measures. This report will explain the current state of play in the OSCE region and the OSCE as an institution and examine how the United States can help contest Russian expansionism and nefarious influence in this space.

A note on Belarus

Putin does not want a democratic Belarus on Russia's borders. Belarus' dictator Alexander Lukashenko, who has managed to stay in office since 1994 through rigged elections and violent repression, has shown he is determined to hold on to power as long as possible. Belarus, which has very little economic, diplomatic, or military power, has essentially become Russia's vassal state, even to the extent of being used to stage attacks on Ukraine. The price is Lukashenko's total loyalty and the complete suppression of democratic civil society and independent media. Belarus' prospects are thus intimately linked to Russia's, but it's essential that Belarus is not forgotten amidst any developments in Russia. Exiled democratic leader and former presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and thousands of Belarusians who were forced to flee Lukashenko's repressions, are waiting for an opportunity to return to a safer Belarus and hold free elections.

UKRAINE

The State of Play

Ukraine has a long road ahead to defeat Russia and minimize its pernicious influence. If Russia were to withdraw its troops from Ukraine tomorrow, Ukraine's problems would not end, though they would be seriously mitigated. Russia's persistent harassment of Ukraine is the result of years of imperial designs on a country that values its unique identity and nationhood. Ukrainians have consistently turned away from Russia and favored integration with the West, anti-corruption measures, and electoral integrity. From the 1991 return to independence after years of domination by Soviet Moscow, to the 2004-05 Orange Revolution, to the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-14, Ukrainians have not hesitated to take to the streets in defense of their ideals, frustrating the Kremlin—and Ukraine's political elements aligned with the Kremlin—at every turn.

The breaking point—Russia's invasion and occupation of Crimea in early 2014, followed by parts of the Donbas—destroyed any lingering hope that Putin would eschew direct military action in Ukraine. This serious breach of international law, an unprovoked invasion and occupation of the sovereign territory of a neighboring country, was met with a tepid response by much of the world. Ukraine became unbalanced—a war dragging on in the east led to a wave of internally displaced people (IDPs), thousands of casualties, and millions of citizens trapped in lawless Russian-occupied territory.

Emboldened, and with Putin facing few meaningful repercussions to his personal power, on February 24, 2022, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, attacking from multiple directions and capturing additional territory. Russian forces have since killed, captured, raped, and tortured thousands of Ukrainian civilians and soldiers and decimated Ukrainian cities and towns with missile strikes. Putin has justified the war by making public statements denying the existence of Ukraine and Ukrainian culture and calling for Russia and Russians to dominate Ukraine and "russify" it. The genocidal intent behind Russia's invasion is clear both in Russian officials' public rhetoric and in the actions of Russian forces, including the kidnapping and removal of Ukrainian children to Russia or Russian-occupied territories.

Amid Russia's continuing attacks on civilian sites, including energy infrastructure, Ukraine has supported its civilians and soldiers with assistance from the West. In August 2024, the Ukrainian army moved into Russia's Kursk Oblast, where it now controls a small portion of territory.

Ukraine's Challenges

The desired outcome of the war for the United States (and Ukraine even more so) should be the complete withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine, restoring it to its 1991 borders. It follows that Russia should be contained within its own borders, leaving the normative order restored and Europe whole, free, and at peace. Anything less creates an opportunity for further revanchism, shows dictators around the world that borders can be changed by force with minimal consequences, and could leave many Ukrainians trapped under cruel Russian occupation.

Ukraine's main tasks for containing Russia are kinetic and political. Its first priority is to halt Russia's advance and hold the line against further attacks. Only then can it push back and retake territory. Ukraine has not yet managed to fully halt Russian advances, though in some cases has slowed them down. Ukraine's incursion into Kursk Oblast, though a useful morale boost causing the Kremlin to scramble, has given Russia an opportunity to advance toward Pokrovsk.

Ukraine must undertake simultaneous efforts to strengthen other dimensions of state power. We will discuss more in this report how the United States can leverage Russia's weaknesses and help other countries to further isolate and punish Russia for its illegal war.

Helping Ukraine Defend Itself

As Ukraine continues to defend itself from Putin's war of aggression, the United States needs to increase its assistance to Kyiv. Since Russia's full-scale invasion, the United States alone has provided \$55.5 billion in military assistance, along with billions in humanitarian aid. Even combined with assistance from U.S. allies and friends, this has not yet been enough to give Ukraine a decisive advantage on the battlefield. Personnel is a major problem: Ukraine simply has fewer soldiers than Russia. Putin is counting on a war of attrition to bleed out the Ukrainian side. As the United States currently has no plans to send its own troops to Ukraine to bolster Ukrainian forces, we must focus on sending military and medical assistance on a massive and dispersed scale. This includes everything from providing advanced air defense systems to addressing the needs of the average soldier—we should ensure that troops on the front line do not have to ration ammunition or die of treatable wounds and injuries.

We must not lose sight of the needs of the average soldier, remembering that morale on a small scale is also essential to an effective fighting force.

Centering Ukrainians and their needs also means we must respect Ukraine's autonomy when it comes to the assistance they receive. Decisions about how Ukraine conducts its military operations are ultimately theirs to make. Ukrainian command understands that they depend on Western weapons and funds and are unlikely to do anything that would risk losing this vital support. Accepting that they know best how to defend themselves, and giving them permission to do so, will strengthen mutual trust and Ukraine's sense of agency. Ukraine has shown through its drone strikes deep into Russia that its priority is slowing down Russia's advance however possible. We should trust Ukraine to use U.S.-provided weapons to pursue this goal and prevent more horrific Russian missile strikes on civilian targets. Ukraine must be allowed to strike any legitimate military targets in Russia, and we should encourage our allies like France and Germany to adhere to these same commonsense principles.

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Make no mistake—Russia will continue to brandish its nuclear weapons to deter other countries from supporting Ukraine and to threaten Ukraine directly. Though none of these threats have been borne out after the crossing of many Russian “red lines” over the years, these threats do affect the foreign policy considerations of other states, including U.S. allies. These fears cannot simply be dismissed and must be assuaged with sound reasoning. It is useful to remember that Russia uses the nuclear threat because it is the only remaining vestige of its Soviet “superpower” status—if indeed the Soviet Union was even a superpower in the first place. Russia's economy today, despite the country's immense size and abundance of resources, is eleventh in the world in terms of GDP—smaller than the economies of both Texas and California.¹ The dictatorship projects strength through propaganda, but this shell of threats and lies covers a pariah state rotten to the core with state corruption and human rights abuses.

The Necessity of U.S. Leadership

As Russia's war on Ukraine continues and other national and international events demand responses from the United States and our allies, war fatigue, or simply a slip into apathy, will become a real risk. (This also means that any delay in assistance to Ukraine, which costs lives in itself, could portend a loss of momentum and public interest in the future.) Russian information operations have eagerly exploited any attention-deflecting events and try to present the war as basically settled on the side of Russia.

The United States thus has a role to play in keeping the focus on Ukraine—to say, yes, there are many things going on in the world, but Ukraine is fighting for the security of all of us from an imperial Russia bent on destruction and conquest. Ukraine’s victory is vital for Europe and for our own national security interests; therefore, we must not only continue but increase our support. If the United States will not lead on this issue, there is no guarantee another country, or group of countries, will be willing or able to take up the mantle as effectively.

In addition, the United States needs top-level political leadership focused on Ukraine, including domestic messaging. Americans should understand that assistance to Ukraine is not simply a charity project in a faraway land but rooted in hard national security interests. If Ukraine appears to be in a losing position, we should expect pro-Russian and appeasement-minded European politicians to return to the public spotlight and perhaps into power. This is a danger for the NATO Alliance and thus for U.S. security. In the worst-case scenario, if Ukraine loses, there will be devastating humanitarian consequences. Russia will pause, regroup, and return to a weakened Ukraine to capture additional territory and gain the industrial capacity it needs to give Russia a major military advantage. More broadly, it will destroy the post-WWII rules-based order that the United States played a pivotal role in constructing; an empowered Russia and China will get much more favorable terms in the new version, further enabling dictators and authoritarian regimes worldwide.

The United States also has a role to play accompanying Ukraine on its path to further political and military integration with the West. Any military victory must be accompanied by responsible and responsive government, rule of law, free elections, and respect for fundamental freedoms. Despite some temporary setbacks in these areas since martial law was imposed at the beginning of the war, Ukraine has made excellent progress in strengthening its democracy over the past several decades. Most importantly, the country has long possessed a robust civil society ready to hold government accountable both during the war and when the war ends. As Ukraine continues its path to formal Euro-Atlantic integration, the United States and its partners must continue to support Ukraine in its quest to meet the standards for reforms necessary for eventual accession to the European Union.

Ukraine now has the most experienced fighting force in Europe, which, thanks to intense military cooperation with NATO Allies, is more entwined with NATO forces than ever before. Ukraine would be an extremely valuable Ally—Ukraine’s integration into Western institutions is its—and our—strongest defense against a revanchist Russia.

THE VISEGRAD FOUR AND THE BALTICS

Introduction

Over the last century, Russian aggression has fundamentally shaped the security landscape of Europe, from historic occupations to its modern-day hybrid tactics in the countries of the Visegrad Four (V4) – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – and the Baltics – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. As past is prologue, countering Russia remains a foremost priority for ensuring a secure and prosperous Europe. This chapter explores the strategies these nations have adopted in response to Russian threats and how the United States can enhance their efforts in bolstering regional security. With a shared history of Soviet occupation, the nations of the Baltics and the V4 possess a unique understanding of the Russian threat; this expertise should be leveraged within NATO, the EU, and broader European leadership to strengthen collective defense.

The Historical Context: Soviet Occupation and Its Legacy

Soviet occupation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania from 1940 to 1991 was marked by annexation, mass deportations, and forced Russification, which has left a lasting impact on the nations' public psyche and national security priorities. This history has driven these countries to pursue robust defense strategies, including accession to NATO and the European Union in 2004. The occupation's legacy fuels a strong commitment to Western alliances and a vigilant stance against Russian aggression.

Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia's experience behind the Iron Curtain after World War II was characterized by political repression and the violent suppression of uprisings, which has profoundly influenced the region. The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined NATO in 1999 and were the first former Warsaw Pact members to join the alliance, with Slovakia following suit in 2004. All four nations joined the European Union in 2004 and have prioritized European integration and collective defense in the wake of the brutal legacy of Soviet occupation. Though isolationist, Euro-skeptic, and even pro-Russian parts of society have emerged in Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, these countries have remained fundamentally committed EU and NATO Allies, recognizing the importance of these alliances for their security.

Current Russian Tactics and Hybrid Warfare

Russian disinformation in the Baltics and V4 countries is a persistent hybrid war tactic aimed at destabilizing societies, undermining trust in democratic institutions, and weakening EU and NATO unity. In the Baltics, Russia targets Russian-speaking minorities with narratives that paint the Baltic governments as hostile or fascist, and often tries to exploit historical grievances among these minorities. According to the *Congressional Research Service*, Russian disinformation typically aims to polarize society by portraying “the Baltic states as illegitimate and dysfunctional, the EU as ineffective and divided, NATO and the United States as imperial powers, and Baltic governments as Russophobic fascist regimes that oppress their ethnic Russian populations.”¹ Lithuanian security services announced its findings in May 2024 that Russia has improved the quality and increased the frequency of its information campaigns against Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland.²

In Poland’s 2020 elections, Russian online actors amplified divisive issues like COVID-19 and immigration to create polarization among voters. These activities are part of a broader strategy where Russia uses information manipulation to weaken the unity and security of these nations, fostering discord and mistrust within their alliances.

The Visegrad countries are particularly vulnerable to Russian disinformation due to the wide range of exploitable narratives from ongoing regional trends like populism.³ A 2017 Oxford Internet Institute report on the Polish information environment found that a single communications firm created over 40,000 fake identities with distinct personalities and multiple social media accounts to influence Polish politics and elections.⁴ In Poland’s 2020 elections, Russian online actors amplified divisive issues like COVID-19 and immigration to create polarization among voters.⁵ These activities are part of a broader strategy where Russia uses information manipulation to weaken the unity and security of these nations, fostering discord and mistrust within their alliances.

Cyber operations are another tool in Russia’s hybrid warfare arsenal. Russia’s 2007 cyberattacks on Estonia in response to the relocation of a Soviet war monument, for example, paralyzed Estonia’s digital infrastructure for weeks.⁶ This incident was the first time that a foreign actor threatened another nation’s security and political independence primarily through cyber operations and set the stage for subsequent Russian cyber campaigns. Russian cyber threats in the Baltics and V4 continue to be a serious concern, with regular attempts to disrupt critical infrastructure and steal sensitive data.

Russia has escalated its hybrid warfare tactics against NATO countries by targeting critical infrastructure across Europe.⁷ For example, Estonian authorities have concluded that three recent incidents involving damage to Baltic undersea infrastructure, including the Balticconnector gas pipeline and communication cables, are related and point to sabotage by Russia.⁸ Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala has said a failed June 2024 arson attack that took place in Prague was "very likely" organized and financed by Russia.⁹ These attacks on energy facilities, transportation systems, and subsea pipelines are escalatory and a direct threat on NATO's collective security.

The State of Play and National Responses

The Baltics: Leading the Charge on Countering Russia

The Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – have consistently positioned themselves as some of the most forward-leaning, hawkish NATO allies, pushing for a robust and proactive response to Russian aggression in Ukraine and the region. Their collective memory of Soviet occupation and geographic proximity to Russia, particularly in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have fostered a heightened sense of strategic awareness that informs their national defense policies. If Russia is not sufficiently deterred in Ukraine, the countries of the Baltics could be Russia's next targets. This year, the Baltic states are spending more than 3 percent of their GDP on defense and have called on others to follow suit.¹⁰ Their investments extend beyond conventional military capabilities and include significant advancements in cybersecurity and counter-disinformation efforts. The Baltic states' emphasis on resilience and preparedness serves as a model within NATO, demonstrating how historical experience can be transformed into a strategic asset that bolsters collective security.

Poland: An Emerging Regional Powerhouse

Poland's emergence as a regional powerhouse is underpinned by its robust economic growth and investments in military modernization. Poland recorded the EU's largest annual and quarterly GDP growth in the second quarter of 2024, and its GDP nears \$700 billion, placing it on a path to rival larger economies within the European Union.¹¹ Warsaw has demonstrated its commitment to enhancing national and regional security through the acquisition of advanced military systems, such as the Patriot missile defense system, HIMARS launchers, Abrams tanks, and F-35 fighter jets.¹² These acquisitions are part of a broader strategy to modernize and expand Poland's armed forces, ensuring they are capable of meeting the security challenges posed by Russia. Poland has increased its defense budget to over 4% of GDP in 2024, with plans to reach 5% of GDP in 2025.¹³

Poland's role within NATO is evolving from that of a security consumer to a security exporter, as evidenced by its active participation in NATO exercises and its leadership in bilateral defense initiatives across Europe.¹⁴ This growing military capability, combined with Poland's economic growth, positions it as a critical player in the European security architecture, capable of both defending its own borders and contributing to the collective defense of its allies.

Warsaw's advocacy for a strong transatlantic relationship and a united European front against Russian aggression in Ukraine has solidified Poland's role as an emerging European leader. Poland's support for Ukraine since the outset of Russia's invasion has been unparalleled. In addition to providing over \$4 billion in military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, Poland hosts around 1 million Ukrainian refugees and has been main transit hub for the transfer of Western weapons to Ukraine and distribution of humanitarian aid. Furthermore, Poland is at the forefront of the EU's efforts to decouple from Russian energy and has become one of the top European importers of U.S. liquified natural gas (LNG), aiming to become a regional LNG hub.

Czech Republic: Supporting Ukraine

Although the Czech Republic has a complex political landscape with some populist, Euro-skeptic streaks, the current ruling government and prevailing sentiment in the population is in alignment with NATO, EU, and Western policies. The election of former NATO general Petr Pavel as President of the Czech Republic in 2023 was a strong indicator of the Czech electorate's desire to continue support for Ukraine.¹⁵ While the U.S. Congress was at a standoff in March 2024 over Ukrainian aid, Czech leadership stepped up to pioneer a plan to deliver hundreds of thousands of extra artillery shells to Ukraine to fill the gap.¹⁶ In explaining the decision to come to Ukraine's aid, Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky explained, "We have a direct experience with 40 years of being a satellite of Moscow, being a country which was invaded in 1968 by Russian tanks to curb the Prague Spring. No one really wants to bring back those [Soviet] times, and I have to say that the population is very sensitive to that."¹⁷ The Czech Republic's experience with Russian espionage and disinformation has further heightened its awareness of the threats posed by Moscow, leading to a focus on strengthening counterintelligence capabilities and building resilience against external interference.

Slovakia: Internal Divisions, Navigating Russian Influence

Slovakia's relationship with Russia is more complex and nuanced than its neighbors. The country is marked by internal divisions, with a significant pro-Russian political faction complicating its foreign policy stance. Despite these challenges, Slovakia remains committed to its NATO obligations and actively participates in joint exercises and initiatives aimed at countering Russian influence.

However, Slovakia's streak of populism poses a significant challenge to its ability to fully align with the broader European and transatlantic consensus on Russia. The country's political landscape is often torn between competing interests, making it difficult to present a unified stance. Nevertheless, Slovakia's participation in NATO and EU initiatives demonstrates its commitment to regional security and its willingness to work within the alliance to counter Russian aggression.

Hungary: A Difficult Partner

Hungary under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has pursued a more pro-Russian stance and increasingly antagonistic approach toward Western alliances and European institutions. Hungary has fostered closer ties with Moscow, stalled EU sanctions on Russia, blocked EU financial assistance to Ukraine, dragged its feet on NATO accession for Sweden, and given regular lip service to war criminal Vladimir Putin.¹⁸ Despite efforts across the continent to reduce dependence on Russian energy, Hungary has increased Russian oil imports, buying billions of dollars of Russian oil and gas annually.¹⁹ Its reluctance to fully align with collective efforts to counter Russian influence has been a source of tension within the alliance.¹⁸ Despite these concerns, Hungary still has the potential to recalibrate its position, especially given its history with Russian aggression and its membership in European institutions. Hungary's future posture will depend on its willingness to prioritize long-term security over short-term political and economic interests.

The Role of the United States in Supporting Regional Security & Countering Russia

Deepening Defense Cooperation and Supporting Energy Diversification

The United States has a critical role to play in supporting the short- and long-term security of the Visegrad Four and the Baltic states, particularly as they face the ongoing threat of Russian aggression. To strengthen regional security, the United States should continue to deepen military cooperation with these nations through joint exercises, defense aid, and the deployment of advanced military assets. The United States should maintain its surged-level presence of U.S. military in the region and increase NATO presence and capabilities on the eastern flank. The United States should also continue to support the region's modernization of armed forces, cyber defense capabilities, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms to counter Russia's hybrid warfare tactics.

Additionally, the United States should continue to promote energy diversification and economic ties with these nations to reduce their dependence on Russian energy and to build economic resilience.

In close partnership with the United States, Poland, for example, has become fully independent from Russian natural gas, in part by becoming one of the top European importers of U.S. LNG.²⁰ Poland is also building its first nuclear power plant in cooperation with U.S. companies Westinghouse and Bechtel, as part of its energy transition.²¹ Expanding access to U.S. LNG, supporting regional energy infrastructure projects, and investing in the energy transition are crucial steps in weakening Russia's leverage over the region. By strengthening economic ties, the U.S. can also help create a more robust economic foundation that can withstand Russian attempts to destabilize these countries through economic coercion.

Shifting European Leadership to the East

The Baltics, with their deep-rooted understanding of and geographic proximity to the Russian threat, and Poland, with its robust military modernization and economic strength, are well-equipped to lead Europe's response to Russian aggression. In 2023, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas signaled her openness to taking the NATO Secretary General role once Jens Stoltenberg stepped down - which was met by excitement among many European leaders who feel the strategic center and leadership of the alliance should move eastwards.²² Instead, a safer choice from Western Europe, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, was selected for the role.²³ By backing these frontline states in their efforts to hold leadership positions within European institutions, the United States not only bolsters regional security but also ensures that the most informed and vigilant voices are at the forefront of decision-making. By doing so, the United States helps to ensure that Europe's collective response to Russia is informed by those who understand the threat most intimately.

Ukraine's Success: The Most Powerful Antidote to Russian Disinformation

The most potent anti-disinformation tool is a victorious Ukraine in the face of Russia's war of aggression. A successful Ukraine on the battlefield serves as a powerful counter-narrative to Russian propaganda, as it reinforces the values of European unity and Western solidarity. As Ukraine secures victories against Russian forces, the disinformation narratives propagated by Russia - aimed at questioning the legitimacy of the EU and NATO, promoting anti-Western sentiment and exploiting internal divisions - become increasingly difficult to sustain.

The United States must continue to provide robust, timely, and consistent support to Ukraine, most notably through economic assistance and providing Ukraine with the weapons it needs to make gains on the battlefield. Simultaneously, the United States should enhance its engagement with Central European governments and civil societies to bolster their resilience against disinformation, especially since Russia continues to enhance the quality and frequency of its disinformation campaigns in the region.

This can include support for independent media, educational programs on media literacy, and partnerships aimed at strengthening democratic institutions. By addressing the root causes of susceptibility to Russian narratives and by showcasing the success of Western-aligned nations like Ukraine, the U.S. can help to dispel the myths propagated by Russian disinformation and reinforce the legitimacy and appeal of the European and transatlantic partnership.

The V4 and Baltic states are critical to countering Russian influence in Europe, given their geographic proximity and deep understanding of Russian tactics. Their leadership and experience are invaluable in shaping European security and should be embraced at the highest levels of decision-making. The United States should continue enhancing defense cooperation, bolstering NATO's eastern flank, and supporting their leadership within European institutions to maintain a secure and united transatlantic alliance.

CENTRAL ASIA

Russia's war on Ukraine has significantly shifted the geopolitical landscape, impacting the relationships between Central Asian countries and Russia and reshaping internal political and economic dynamics within Central Asia itself. It has motivated Central Asian states to diversify their relations with other countries and seek alternate economic partners and security guarantees, as well as to strengthen regional cooperation. These changes offer an opportunity for the United States to increase its engagement in the region to counter Russian influence and to support the efforts of Central Asian states to realign their foreign relations.

Although Central Asian countries have maintained close relations and economic ties with Russia, they have not endorsed Putin's war, and they have banned their citizens from serving in foreign militaries. Instead, Central Asian countries have asserted their independence from the legacy of colonial Soviet influence and strengthened intraregional relations. At the same time, sanctions against Russia and Russian businesses fleeing the war have been a boon to economies in the region despite Western sanctions against Russia, fueled by increased trade, relocation of businesses previously based in Russia, as well as continued remittances sent back from migrant workers in Russia. Contrary to initial apprehensions that sanctions would debilitate Russia's economy and impede employment opportunities for migrants, the reality has proved otherwise. The demand for migrant labor has persisted as Russian citizens are conscripted for military service and industries continue to operate. Russia registered 3.5 million new migrant workers in 2022 and 90% of them were from Central Asia.¹

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, members of Russia's single market Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), find themselves strategically positioned as conduits to non-sanctioned markets. Many Russian businesses and workers have relocated to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan since February 2022, where they have been welcomed and contribute to economic development. Nevertheless, the region remains economically and socially fragile, as demonstrated by significant violence in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan over the past few years. Extremism also is a rising concern, particularly in the wake of the participation by Tajik nationals in the March 2024 Crocus City Hall terrorist attack in Moscow and increasing Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-K) propaganda in Central Asia, especially in Tajikistan. Russia has stepped up dissemination of disinformation in the region, both supporting its war and denigrating the United States and Europe.

There also are significant human rights problems in the region as the regimes have increasingly imposed Russian-style policies to tighten control, particularly on civil society.

Changing Foreign Relations and Alliances

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has remained the main security, economic, and political partner of the Central Asian states. At the same time, Central Asian states have pursued a “multi-vector” foreign policy, aiming to balance their close Russia relations with other countries and strengthen their own sovereignty. Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this policy has become even more important as governments in the region have sought to maintain good relations with Russia while not endorsing its war. Putin has visited all five Central Asian states since 2022, and all five Central Asian presidents attended the May 9 Victory Day parade in Moscow at Putin’s invitation in both 2023 and 2024. At the same time, they either formally abstained or were absent for United Nations votes condemning Russia’s aggression. None have followed Russia’s recognition of independence of Russian-controlled regions in eastern Ukraine, and Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have publicly said they would not. Turkmenistan maintains an official policy of neutrality.

States in the region are strengthening relations with other countries. China has held a summit with the Central Asian states, and there have been several high-level visits between China and the countries of Central Asia. Russia’s war on Ukraine and Western sanctions against Russia have spurred Chinese trade as Central Asia has become a reexport hub for goods destined for Russia as well as for transit to Europe. Central Asian states are also developing their engagement with Afghanistan and Iran, mainly to open space for new transit and trade routes as alternatives to Russia. The EU has also stepped up its engagement with Central Asia, which can provide both an alternate source of energy and a transit route to bypass Russia.

Security Implications

Russia’s ongoing war on Ukraine has altered the security dynamics in the region and undermined Central Asian states’ reliance on Russia as a security guarantor. Russian politicians have for years made ominous comments calling into question Kazakhstan’s nationhood, with its long border with Russia and significant ethnic Russian population. China already has had at least two military facilities in Tajikistan for some time and is said to be building a military base in the country.² During the 2023 China-Central Asia summit, states discussed China’s Global Security Initiative (GSI), aimed at bolstering military and political cooperation. Central Asian states are also looking to Türkiye for assistance; Kazakhstan and Tajikistan signed military cooperation agreements with Türkiye in 2024.

Nevertheless, most Central Asian states maintain close security ties to Russia as part of various alliances. Many of the countries of Central Asia are members of regional organizations dominated by Russia. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are members of the Collective Treaty Security Organization (CSTO), viewed as a counter to NATO and the West (Uzbekistan withdrew in 2012). Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); originally founded by Russia and China, the SCO demonstrated its pro-Russian stance by admitting Belarus as a full member during its July 2024 summit in Astana. Membership in these organizations ensures continued Russian (and Chinese) influence.

Regional and Political Impact

The changing dynamics with Russia have resulted in strengthened regional relations and cooperation among the countries of Central Asia, including a regional identity and efforts to harmonize economic and security policies. The sixth summit of Central Asian leaders in August 2024 focused on regional integration and cooperation and resulted in the signing of a strategy for the development of regional cooperation called “Central Asia 2040.” This sets up mechanisms to harmonize economic policies, address common security threats, energy solutions, transportation systems, and build a regional identity.³ Central Asian energy ministers held a first regional meeting in August 2024 and signed a joint communique on cooperation.

At the same time, several Central Asian leaders have moved while the West was distracted by Russia’s war to consolidate power and impose controls on potential opposition. In April 2024, Kyrgyzstan enacted a Russian-style foreign agents law. Kazakhstan created a foreign agents register in 2023, and its parliament signed an agreement with the Russian Duma in 2024 to examine how to counter foreign influence. Tajikistan cracked down in the autonomous Gorno-Badakshan region following protests by the Pamiri minority in 2022. Uzbekistan had made progress since President Mirziyoyev took over after the death of long-time dictator Karimov, but in the past couple of years has moved backwards on freedom of media and expression. In 2023, Uzbekistan changed its constitution to extend the presidential term in office from 5 to 7 years and reset the two-term limit, allowing current President Mirziyoyev to serve until 2037. In 2022, Uzbek authorities violently dispersed protesters in the country’s autonomous Karakalpakstan region and have continued to arrest activists and ban groups supporting the region’s autonomy.

Economic Impact

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is leading to several shifts affecting the economies in Central Asia, much driven by Western sanctions, including diversification of trade and transit routes, new opportunities for energy exports, and changes in remittance flows and labor markets.

Russia's war might even call into question the effectiveness of the Russian-founded single market Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), to which Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan belong.

From independence until the start of 2022, landlocked Central Asian states depended on transit routes to and through Russia for trade as well as for their own supply chains. Kazakhstan's oil exports reach foreign markets through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, which ends on the Russian Black Sea coast. Russia interrupted its flow several times since February 2022, sending a strong message to Astana that Moscow could control Kazakhstan's main source of revenue.

As a result, Central Asian states are looking for alternate trade and transit routes. The main focus since 2022 has been on the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), better known as the Middle Corridor. This is a system for cargo transit that would connect Europe to China with possible routes through Kazakhstan or through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, bypassing Russia. Estimates suggest that the Middle Corridor would be able to transport up to 120,000 containers annually.⁴



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At the same time, Central Asia has become a hub to circumvent trade restrictions due to Western sanctions against Russia. The United States and the European Union have already sanctioned several companies and individuals in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, mainly for acting as intermediaries for dual-use goods destined for Russia coming from Europe and China, including electronics and military components. Non-sanctioned goods also transit Central Asia to Russia, particularly through EAEU members Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. There has also been an influx of Russian businesses and businesses that had been based in Russia pre-2022 which have relocated to avoid sanctions and other effects of the war. Kazakhstan has increased its export of hydrocarbons to Europe to replace some previously supplied by Russia, although Russia's control of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium has limited these efforts.⁵

As a result, economies in Central Asia have boomed. According to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), Central Asia saw the largest upward growth forecast, which was approximately 5.7% in 2023 and is expected to be 5.9% in 2024.

So far, Western sanctions have not significantly weakened the Russian economy, and Central Asian migrant workers have continued to find work and send home the remittances that form a significant part of the GDPs of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, in particular. However, should the Russian economy falter, it could have a negative economic impact on the region, particularly if migrant workers could not continue to send back remittances. Tajikistan is particularly dependent on Russia for food imports and fuel and energy resources, as well as the remittances sent back by Tajik workers in Russia.

Social Impact

There are as many as 10 million Central Asian labor migrants in Russia, according to the Russian interior ministry, more than before Russia's war, as labor shortages in Russia due to conscription have provided more work opportunities.⁶ Nevertheless, some migrant workers are returning from Russia, primarily either Tajiks expelled after the terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall in Moscow in March 2024, or Central Asians avoiding recruitment into the Russian military. Tajikistan has said that as of August, Russia had deported more than 17,000 Tajik citizens in 2024.⁷ Russia has also targeted Central Asians for recruitment to fight in Ukraine, sometimes through incentives such as money or Russian citizenship, but more recently through a new law that requires new Russian passport holders to register for military service in Ukraine.⁸

The return of migrant workers – many of whom are young men – could add to already high unemployment and exacerbate concerns about social stability and vulnerability to radicalization by extremist Islamist groups. So far, most Central Asians who have joined radical groups have been recruited while working abroad, mainly in Russia.⁹ This could change quickly, however, particularly if some of those returning bring with them their radical networks and contacts.

Popular perceptions of Russia among Central Asians have changed since Russia's war on Ukraine, although citizens are still vulnerable to Russian disinformation. Many Central Asians, particularly in the older generation, continue to rely on Russian television for their news, which makes them more vulnerable to Russian propaganda and disinformation.¹⁰ Labor migrants in Russia also relay back to their families in Central Asia the Russian justifications for the war on Ukraine they absorb through Russian media.¹¹ Russian propaganda seeks to denigrate the West and the United States, both for supporting Ukraine and for Western "immorality."¹² This has led to increasingly negative views of the United States as compared to Russia among Central Asians.¹³

U.S. Engagement and Policy Response

Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and the resulting change in relations between Central Asia and Russia provides an opportunity for the United States to increase its engagement with the region and weaken Russian influence. The United States currently has good bilateral relations with each of the Central Asian states and engages with them regionally through the C5+1 platform, which aims at advancing cooperation with the Central Asian states (the C5), addressing common concerns, and supporting their sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁴ Nevertheless, there are many ways in which the United States could strengthen its policies, programs, and investment in the region.

The United States should increase its overall engagement with the region, including high level visits and meetings, as well as assistance and economic investment. That should include the U.S. president visiting Central Asia, which Putin and Xi both have already done, as well as increased U.S. support for the development of alternative routes for trade, hydrocarbons, and transit – which would weaken Russia's ability to control both the economies of Central Asia and the flow of products through them to the West. The United States can also encourage the development of regional cooperation through expanding the existing C5+1 framework, and offering, and coordinating with the EU, to develop and harmonize regional trade, transit and other regulations to support the region's independence from Russia.

Bilaterally, the United States could counter Russia by increasing U.S. soft power in the region, including by increasing exchange programs and educational opportunities for Central Asians. Additionally, the United States could contribute to improving healthcare systems as well as increasing its engagement on environmental issues, as Central Asia is one of the regions most impacted by climate change. The United States should support programs to counter Russian disinformation and improve perceptions of the West by supporting independent media in the region, offering alternate sources for news, and by reaching out to youth, who have less of a tie to the former Soviet Union.

Other specific actions the United States could take include lifting the Jackson Vanik amendment, which denies normal trade relations (NTR) status to some former Soviet states.¹⁵ In developing postwar reconstruction plans for Ukraine, the United States should include provisions that encourage hiring Central Asian migrant workers, who need alternatives to Russia for work in order to diminish their reliance on Russia. Multilaterally, the United States should support strengthening the work of the OSCE in Central Asia. The OSCE is one of the only international organizations with field missions in all five Central Asian states and increased U.S. funding and political support for OSCE projects in Central Asia would help strengthen government institutions and civil society against Russian influence.

Since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has maintained significant power in the Central Asian region despite the desire of the states to diversify their foreign relations and economic ties. The United States has an opportunity to step up and strengthen its engagement in the region, weakening Russian control. If this chance is not fully taken, Central Asia will be left to continued Russian influence and disinformation, a trajectory of authoritarianism, and possible economic and social destabilization.

WESTERN BALKANS

The principal aim of Russian foreign policy in the Western Balkans is to disrupt or block the region's integration into Western institutions, namely NATO and the European Union. To this end, Moscow seeks to exploit political fissures, popular disillusionment with the West, energy dependence, and endemic corruption to expand its influence and forestall progress toward Western integration. As in other regions, Russian interventions can take the form of hybrid threats, including disinformation campaigns, intelligence operations, and energy blackmail among other means.

Political Divisions

Ethnic Serb leaders, political movements, religious institutions, and aligned media are Russia's primary vectors of political influence in the Balkans owing in large part to popular political narratives that emphasize historical Serb-Russian Slavic kinship and alignments on foreign policy. These narratives capitalize particularly on resentments stemming from NATO's interventions in the 1990s aimed principally at stopping the genocide of Bosniaks by ethnic Bosnian Serb forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo. Many prominent Serbian political movements use these Western-led interventions to argue that the West is anti-Serb and committed to disrupting Serbian nationalists' longstanding irredentist ambitions to unite ethnic Serbs under one state. Given Russia's anti-NATO orientation and non-recognition of Kosovo, popular Serb politicians generally cast Moscow as a geostrategic ally to Serbia.

The prevalence of pro-Russian narratives among Serb politicians and media extends from Belgrade to minority ethnic Serb communities across the region, most notably in BiH and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo. In all these countries, prominent Serb political movements have effectively disrupted Western integration, thus wittingly or unwittingly advancing Russian interests.

In Serbia, President Aleksandar Vucic and his ruling party have sought to balance relations with the West and Moscow, avoiding aligning entirely with either. Serbia has been an EU candidate country since 2012 and has successfully opened 22 of 35 chapters in the accession process.¹ Nevertheless, it has resisted comprehensive alignment with the EU. Most notably, Serbia is the only European country apart from Russia's co-belligerent Belarus to not adopt Western sanctions against the Kremlin following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.²

Belgrade also remains opposed to joining NATO, despite ongoing cooperation with the alliance, and has made significant military purchases from Russia and China in recent years.³ Reflecting its geostrategic ambiguity, however, the Serbian government has simultaneously maintained cordial relations with Kyiv, reportedly provided quiet military and non-lethal aid to Ukraine's war effort, and purchased defense items from France. The supposed "middle way" represented by this policy, in reality, redounds to Russia's strategic benefit as it precludes Serbia's full Western integration. Over time, Serbia's balancing act will prove incongruous with its expressed intent to join the EU as greater alignment with EU policy would inevitably provoke Russian resistance.

In BiH, aggressive Serb nationalist politicians have rendered the sub-state entity Republika Srpska a major obstacle to functional, multiethnic coexistence that is a prerequisite for accession to the EU and NATO. Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik routinely demonizes the West and NATO, lionizes Putin, and advances de facto separatism that undermines Bosnia's sovereignty and viability as an independent, democratic country. So long as Republika Srpska remains opposed to NATO accession, BiH cannot realize its stated aspiration to join the alliance. Meanwhile, the entity's increasingly anti-democratic practices make the country's EU accession an increasingly distant prospect. Russia is only too keen to exploit Republika Srpska's intransigence—plus similar ethnonationalist trends among ethnic Croats—to prevent BiH's European integration. Indeed, were Republika Srpska to advance its de facto or actual secession with Moscow's backing, the partition of BiH's territory would function similarly to Russia's attempts to cleave off Georgian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan territory in recent years: effectively cratering the country's hopes of peacefully acceding to the Western community of nations.⁴

In Montenegro, a fringe of assertive Serb ethno-nationalist politicians aligned with Moscow has grown in popularity and power in recent years. Led by the Democratic Front political party, pro-Serbian and pro-Russian politicians vehemently oppose Montenegro's alignment with NATO and the West. Although a new pro-Western political party, Europe Now!, prevailed in the most recent parliamentary election, it controversially opted to form a coalition government with a pro-Serbian bloc, "For the Future of Montenegro" (ZBCG), which includes the Democratic Front. The coalition deal avoided putting ZBCG in charge of the most sensitive national security portfolios but also elevated Democratic Front politician Andrija Mandić to Speaker of Parliament. Mandić and fellow Democratic Front parliamentarian Milan Knežević were convicted of participating in the 2016 Russian-backed coup plot that sought to derail Montenegro's impending NATO accession, although they were subsequently acquitted in July 2024.⁵ The coup attempt was the culmination of a years-long, multi-pronged influence campaign by Russia to turn Montenegrin public opinion against NATO and block the country's accession to the alliance.

Russia is a key backer of Serbia's non-recognition policy toward Kosovo that impedes Pristina's integration into international institutions, including the United Nations, OSCE, NATO, and European Union.

While all parties bear responsibility for the fact that normalization negotiations have dragged on for more than a decade, Russia benefits from the unresolved nature of the conflict. A negotiated end to the conflict and normalization between Serbia and Kosovo would deprive Russia of enormous political leverage over Belgrade. Furthermore, a resolution would pave the way for Kosovo's accession to the EU and NATO. As a result, it is in the Kremlin's interest to prevent a resolution and stoke destabilizing actions by Belgrade and the ethnic Serb minority in Kosovo. Belgrade wields profound influence over Kosovo's ethnic Serb minority and almost certainly provides political direction to Serb politicians and arms Serb paramilitary groups that have contributed to bringing the conflict there to the brink of war.

Disillusionment with the West

Russia seeks to capitalize on popular discontentment toward the West to portray itself as a favorable alternative partner. As discussed above, among ethnic Serbs, Russia exploits popular resentments stemming from NATO interventions and Western support for Kosovo's independence. Moscow also aims to convince less ideologically committed constituencies that the West is an unreliable and possibly dangerous actor in the region. To that end, Russian leaders and media prey primarily upon popular frustrations stemming from the region's languishing EU accession process and flagging Western engagement.

Languishing EU Accession Prospects

Aside from Croatia, which joined the EU in 2013, many Western Balkans countries have stalled in their progress toward accession to the European bloc. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have held candidate status with the EU for at least a decade but have no confirmed timeframe for attaining full membership. The blame for this state of affairs lies both with the EU, with its inconsistent appetite for expansion, and with the prospective member countries, which have been slow to adopt fundamental reforms required for EU membership. Adding to their frustrations, the candidate countries often perceive the EU accession process as subject to arbitrary political whims.

Echoing the anti-Western narratives discussed above, ethnic Serbs across the region express the greatest uncertainty about the EU's intentions about extending membership to their countries, according to public opinion polling.⁶ These perceptions provide powerful inroads for Russian influence operations.

BiH demonstrates the ways in which the EU's efforts to keep hope alive in the accession process despite extremely limited concrete reform progress by candidate countries contributes to popular disillusionment. Although the EU agreed to open accession negotiations with BiH in May 2024, this supposed movement in Bosnia's candidacy, does not correlate to tangible progress toward aligning its domestic institutions with the EU *acquis*.

Overall, skepticism is growing in BiH that the country has a viable path toward the EU and that the EU's claims to the contrary hold any water. While a razor thin majority (44% to 42%) still believe the EU is serious about extending membership to Bosnia, a mere 20% of ethnic Serbs believe the same, with a whopping 65% doubting the EU's sincerity altogether.

Next year, North Macedonia will mark two decades as an EU candidate country. Of all Balkan candidates, Skopje has had the most tortured path toward EU membership, contributing to heightened levels of EU skepticism in the population. Today, a plurality of Montenegrins (47% to 34%) say the EU is not serious about extending membership status to their country. This view is heavily informed by the fact that North Macedonia made significant concessions to Greece to overcome the latter's objections to the EU opening accession talks with Skopje. The former ruling party expended enormous political capital to negotiate the landmark Prespa Agreement in 2019, which among other things led to Skopje's adoption of the name North Macedonia to resolve its longstanding name dispute with Greece. Skopje concluded this deal in the face of popular ambivalence and Russian opposition with the understanding that doing so would unlock EU accession talks, only to see Bulgaria in 2020 suddenly heap more politically sensitive conditions on North Macedonia's EU candidacy. This sequence of events signals to political leaders in North Macedonia and beyond that the path toward EU membership is fraught with political risk that may go unrewarded.

Flagging U.S. Engagement

Many in the region regret the United States' diminished engagement in the region following the high watermark of U.S. involvement set in the 1990s and early 2000s with NATO interventions, negotiation of the Dayton Accords, and backing of Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia. The United States' prioritization of other regions in the post-9/11 world at the expense of the Balkans has left particularly non-Serb ethnic groups nervous about the solidity of the United States' commitment to their security.

Russia and China are keen to exploit this environment of uncertainty to sow distrust of Washington and promote alternatives to U.S. leadership in the region. Although most of these non-Serb ethnic groups are unlikely to embrace Russia as an alternative security guarantor, they could increasingly support more strident ethno-nationalist voices who argue that ethnic groups must take matters into their own hands to ensure their own security. The elevated insecurity arising from this scenario would further Russia's goals of thwarting the region's integration into Western institutions.

Energy Dependence

Although the Western Balkan's limited gas infrastructure and widespread use of coal and hydropower mean that its energy dependence on Russia is not as pronounced as in other regions, Russia is still capable of using energy as a weapon there. Today, Serbia, BiH, and North Macedonia remain mostly reliant on Russia for gas. Furthermore, Russian energy companies own significant stakes in key oil and gas companies and infrastructure in Serbia and BiH.⁷⁸⁹

Russian gas reaches the Western Balkans via pipelines transiting Ukraine to the north as well as the TurkStream project, strategically designed to bypass Ukraine, which traverses the Black Sea to bring Russian gas into southeastern Europe via Türkiye. The BalkanStream extension of TurkStream pipes this gas through Bulgaria into Serbia and beyond.

In addition to completely satisfying Serbia's current gas needs, BalkanStream serves as BiH's only pipeline connection. Regrettably, a Western-backed proposal to build a pipeline connecting BiH to Croatia's Krk liquid natural gas (LNG) regasification terminal is bogged down in interethnic political wrangling in Sarajevo.

Croatia's Krk island LNG regasification terminal, which began operation in January 2021, is just one of several projects that have improved the region's energy independence in recent years. Another major floating LNG regasification terminal off the coast of Alexandroupolis, Greece is also poised to begin commercial operations any day now. In addition, Serbia and North Macedonia have concluded agreements in the past year to enable the importation of Azerbaijani gas via Bulgaria.¹⁰¹¹ In another hopeful development, an interconnector linking Greece and North Macedonia is due to begin construction soon, piping gas from Alexandroupolis into North Macedonia.

Democracy, Rule of Law, and Corruption

It is no coincidence that the countries in the region at greatest risk of Russian influence are those with the weakest democratic institutions and highest levels of corruption. Weak democracy and graft provide malign foreign actors with more opportunities to undermine the common good and coopt individuals and institutions for nefarious ends. These problems permeate the region, although they are more pronounced in particular countries. According to Freedom House's annual Freedom in the World Index, all Western Balkans nations are "partly free," with the sole exception of EU-member country Croatia, which Freedom House considers "free."

In this context, Serbia and BiH are of principle concern. Given significant constituencies in these countries susceptible to pro-Russian narratives, the weakness of their political checks and balances and elevated levels of corruption exacerbate their vulnerability to Russian manipulation.

Serbia ranks at or near the bottom of the Western Balkans countries in popular indices of political freedom, media freedom, and corruption. In addition to its “partly free” ranking from Freedom House (to which Serbia was downgraded from “free” in 2019), Reporters Without Borders ranks Serbia 98th in the world for press freedom and Transparency International puts it at 104th for perceptions of corruption.¹² Among Western Balkan countries, only Albania ranks lower on media freedom at 99. Unfortunately, Serbia’s trajectory is trending downward, notching losses in political and media freedom from 2022 to 2023. Meanwhile, BiH is ranked 81st in the world for media freedom by Reporters Without Borders and Transparency International puts it at 108th for perceptions of corruption.

U.S. Opportunities

Political Divisions

The United States should expand its current policy of targeting poisonous actors in the region—particularly those with known ties to Russia—with sanctions aimed at undercutting their destabilizing influence. Global Magnitsky and 7031(c) sanctions provide powerful tools for designating individuals and entities involved in significant acts of corruption while CAATSA enables the U.S. to target many forms of collusion with Russia. Furthermore, Executive Order 14033 allows the President to sanction those involved in destabilizing activities in the Western Balkans.¹³ While the United States has energetically applied sanctions in BiH it has been more reluctant to do so in Serbia.¹⁴ Only two current Serbian officials are designated under these authorities despite high-ranking Serbian officials making major defense acquisitions from Russia, perpetrating significant corruption, and are supporting destabilizing activities by official and non-official Serb actors in Bosnia, Kosovo, and beyond.

Helsinki Commissioners Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, Co-Chairman Sen. Ben Cardin, and Ranking Member Sen. Roger Wicker have introduced the Western Balkans Democracy and Prosperity Act to promote economic development, anti-corruption activities, and international exchanges in the Balkans. The bill would further codify U.S. executive orders that grant authority for sanctions “against those who threaten peace and stability in the Western Balkans and are engaged in corrupt behavior.”¹⁵

The United States should also consider taking a more forward-leaning approach toward addressing thorny political impasses in BiH and between Serbia and Kosovo. When the opportunity presents itself, the United States should take the lead in proposing and forging compromises, including using its significant leverage to secure concessions. Although this more muscular approach carries some risk, the region’s current posture of muddling through presents at least an equal risk of calamity. This more proactive U.S. posture would also serve to address popular frustration with Washington’s diminished engagement in the region.

Disillusionment with the West

The United States should encourage the EU to adopt a fairer, more transparent, and more honest approach to the accession progress. The EU should manage the process in a way that incentivizes meaningful reforms and rewards courageous political compromises that pave the way toward EU membership. Building false hopes and rewarding non-existent progress makes for pleasant headlines in the short-term but undermines public trust in the medium-to-long-term. Furthermore, the EU must prevent member countries from piling unforeseen and unreasonable demands onto candidate countries.

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Energy Dependence

The United States should work with its European partners and the private sector to promote the construction of high-impact energy infrastructure aimed at weaning the region off Russian oil and gas. Given the geostrategic stakes, energy transition goals should not stand in the way of building new natural gas infrastructure. What's more, expanding natural gas use would generally diminish the region's reliance on coal, which generates greater carbon emissions and pollution.

Democracy, Rule of Law, and Corruption

U.S. policy should recognize the strong linkage between increased Russian influence and weak democratic institutions. A strategic approach aimed at strengthening democratic institutions and fostering sustainable, multiethnic coexistence is required. It is critical to support the development of robust elected representation, judicial structures, civil service, media sector, and civil society, which serve as the most effective antibodies to excise Russian influence root and branch. Passing the Western Balkans Democracy and Prosperity Act would be an important step in this direction.

Military aid

Hard security also plays an important role in countering Russian influence in the Western Balkans and is complimentary to the comprehensive security approach outlined above.

As in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia would like to stoke conflicts that compromise the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Balkans states in order to preclude their accession to NATO. Indeed, the Russian Ambassador to Sarajevo has warned in recent years that Bosnia's NATO integration would result in concrete action by Moscow to include a Ukraine-like scenario.¹⁶

In the face of such threats, Western Balkans countries must have a credible ability to defend their sovereignty and territorial integrity. In this context, BiH and Kosovo face the most imminent threats of a fundamental security breakdown.

In Bosnia, the United States should press EU partners to expand their investments of resources and manpower to Operation Althea. Current force and preparedness levels are not sufficient to deter secessionist efforts by Republika Srpska. As the United States and EU rhetorically support Bosnia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, it is critical that these words can be backed up with actions.

In Kosovo, the Banjska Monastery incident in September 2023 revealed concrete efforts by Serbian paramilitaries to import significant amounts of military-grade weaponry into northern Kosovo. The United States should support Kosovo's efforts to counter these efforts and muster a credible deterrent to irredentist moves by the Serbian military or paramilitaries. The United States' sale of Javelin missiles to Pristina earlier this year was a powerful signal that should augur further defense sales and a deepened bilateral defense cooperation relationship.

THE CAUCASUS

Introduction

The South Caucasus region, comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, is currently at a pivotal moment in its history, standing on the edge of both opportunity and peril. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the region has long been considered a strategic frontier. Today, the South Caucasus faces new and unprecedented challenges, as Russia seeks to maintain its grip despite the consequences of an extended military quagmire in Ukraine. Weakening of Russian material influence presents new possibilities for regional actors and international stakeholders to realign their interests. However, Moscow remains determined to maintain its influence through both overt and covert means. In the context of long-term Euro-Atlantic contestation with a recalcitrant and aggressive Russia, the South Caucasus is an important theater. This complex dynamic places the South Caucasus on a precarious strategic knife's edge, requiring the United States and our allies to rethink their approach to the region.

The South Caucasus: On the Edge of Tomorrow

The South Caucasus is currently experiencing profound political and strategic shifts, driven in large part by the changing dynamics of Russian influence. Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine has drained its resources and significantly weakened its strategic posture throughout Europe and Eurasia, including the South Caucasus. Armenia, traditionally one of Russia's closest allies, is rapidly moving away from Moscow, while Azerbaijan has adopted a collaborative approach with Russia, balanced with its longstanding ties to Türkiye, a NATO member.¹ Meanwhile, Georgia's Georgian Dream government has recently adopted a more openly illiberal and pro-Russian orientation, which runs counter to its population's largely pro-Western sentiments.²³⁴ These shifts have created significant opportunities and risks for regional actors and their international partners.

Russia's declining influence is particularly evident in Armenia. Following the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War in which Azerbaijan, backed by Türkiye, emerged victorious, Armenia has increasingly distanced itself from Moscow.⁵ According to successive polling, Armenians increasingly and overwhelmingly reported dramatic declines in sentiment towards Russia, feeling that Moscow abandoned them during the conflict and failed to live up to its treaty obligations as a security guarantor.⁶

An emerging analytical consensus points to Russian support for Azerbaijani military operations against Armenia and the now-depopulated Nagorno Karabakh, including the secret provision of arms to Azerbaijan through Belarus, a Kremlin satellite regime.⁷ In turn, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's government has responded by openly criticizing Russia's lack of support and by taking steps to reduce Armenia's dependence on Russian military and economic institutions. This includes suspending Armenia's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and signaling a desire for closer ties with the West.⁸ At the same time, Armenia has been actively pursuing normalization talks with Türkiye and seeking stronger relationships with the European Union and the United States. These moves represent a significant departure from Armenia's historically close alignment with Russia, indicating a strategic pivot that could have far-reaching implications for regional stability.

In Georgia, the situation is also complex. For years, Georgia has been viewed as a pro-Western stalwart in the South Caucasus, with aspirations for membership in the European Union and NATO. However, recent developments have seen the Georgian government, led by the Georgian Dream party, adopt a more openly anti-Western and illiberal stance.⁹ This shift has been marked by crackdowns on opposition figures and civil society organizations, as well as closer ties with Russia.¹⁰¹¹ Despite these moves by the government, the majority of the Georgian population remains strongly pro-European and pro-NATO, creating a sharp divide between the government and its people. This was most clearly expressed in months-long mass protests in spring 2024 in defiance of the Russian-style foreign agent law pushed by the Georgian Dream government, where as many as 300,000 Georgians took to the streets in protest.¹² This situation creates a fundamental instability in the region, where Russia continues to host garrisons (however diminished by its war on Ukraine), with a government that is openly anti-west and increasingly Russia-friendly—and a population that is fundamentally opposed.

Azerbaijan, long transactional and pragmatic in its approach to its foreign policy, has increasingly alienated its relationships with the West in pursuit of military dominance. While Baku has aligned itself closely with Türkiye, a NATO member, it also maintains an "allied" relationship with Russia.¹³ Azerbaijan's decision to accept an alliance designation from Russia in 2022—just hours before Russia launched its full-scale invasion against Ukraine—appears to reflect a transaction where Azerbaijan essentially surrendered its residual Western moorings in exchange for Russian support for its diminution of Armenia and the consolidation of its regional power. However, this approach is not without its challenges. While Azerbaijan and Russia share complementary regime types as authoritarian powers, Baku's embrace of Moscow leaves it more susceptible to Russian regional domination.

Unsurprisingly, Moscow remains determined to maintain its foothold in the South Caucasus through a combination of diplomatic, military, and economic strategies.

In Armenia, for example, there are indications that Russia may seek to destabilize the current government, which it perceives as overly pro-Western, by exploiting domestic discontent and fostering political instability. At the same time, Russia has strengthened its strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, partly by supporting Baku during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War and by ensuring that Azerbaijani energy exports continue to flow through Russian-controlled routes. In Georgia, Moscow has managed to walk the fine line between maintaining an illegal military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in contravention of internationally recognized Georgian sovereignty while currying political favor with the ruling Georgian Dream regime. This multifaceted strategy reflects Russia's broader goal of maintaining its influence in the South Caucasus.

Reassessing U.S. Policy in the South Caucasus

In light of these shifting geopolitical dynamics, the United States must reassess its approach to the South Caucasus. Traditional U.S. assumptions about the region's political alignments have become increasingly outdated. For decades, U.S. policy has been based on a relatively simple understanding: Armenia was seen as a stalwart Russian ally, Georgia as a committed pro-Western partner, and Azerbaijan as a multi-vector state balancing its relations between the West and Russia. However, recent developments have upended these assumptions, revealing a more complex and fluid geopolitical landscape.

Armenia, for instance, has emerged as a potential democratic partner for the United States. Once viewed primarily as a Russian ally, Armenia's political transformation since the Velvet Revolution of 2018 has made it a candidate for deeper engagement with the West. Under Prime Minister Pashinyan, Armenia has sought to reduce its dependence on Russia and align itself more closely with Western institutions. This shift represents a unique opportunity for the United States to strengthen its ties with Armenia. By providing diplomatic support and expanding economic and security assistance, the U.S. can help Armenia navigate its precarious security situation, resist external pressures, and develop stronger democratic institutions.

At the same time, Georgia's political shift presents a significant challenge for U.S. policy. The Georgian government's drift toward a pro-Russian stance, coupled with its increasingly illiberal domestic policies, has raised concerns in Washington and other Western capitals. However, the strong pro-Western sentiment among the Georgian populace suggests that there is still potential for a renewed U.S.-Georgia partnership. The United States should adopt a dual-track strategy that involves both holding the Georgian government accountable for its democratic backsliding and providing mechanisms for deeper integration with Western institutions, conditional on a return to democratic governance.

Legislative actions such as Helsinki Commission Chairman Wilson's bipartisan MEGOBARI Act, which links U.S. support to democratic reforms, could serve as a model for future U.S. policy toward Georgia.¹⁴

Azerbaijan presents a different set of challenges and opportunities. Although Baku has cultivated a robust, cooperative relationship with Russia, it still has the potential to serve as a constructive partner for the United States in certain respects.¹⁵ However, Azerbaijan's recent military actions and its campaign of human rights violations have understandably strained its relations with the West. To address these challenges, the United States should pursue an approach that combines diplomatic pressure with the use of economic and political leverage. Washington should make it clear that improved relations with the West, and the concrete economic and security benefits that they can accrue, are contingent on Azerbaijan's commitment to finalize a durable and fair-minded peace with Armenia, distance itself from the Kremlin's imperial agenda, and improve its domestic human rights record. Those principles should be non-negotiable and tangibly enforceable with Azerbaijan as they would be with any other country. At the same time, the U.S. could offer a clear path to enhanced cooperation, demonstrating how a closer partnership with the West could bring greater stability and prosperity to Azerbaijan and the wider region.

Supporting Ukraine as a Pillar of Caucasus Stability

One of the key factors influencing the future of the South Caucasus is the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine.¹⁶ As Russia's imperial strategic culture is illuminated as the primary factor in its strategy of aggressive military adventurism, de-imperialization of Russia is essential for providing the South Caucasus with an opportunity for greater stability and international engagement.¹⁷ A Ukrainian victory is crucial not only for Ukraine's sovereignty but also for diminishing Russia's capacity to project power in the South Caucasus.

As Russia's imperial strategic culture is illuminated as the primary factor in its strategy of aggressive military adventurism, de-imperialization of Russia is essential for providing the South Caucasus with an opportunity for greater stability and international engagement.

A victory for Ukraine would represent a significant blow to Russia's ability to maintain its influence in its so-called "near abroad," including the South Caucasus. The war in Ukraine has already exposed the limits of Russian military power and undermined Moscow's credibility as a security guarantor for its allies. A decisive Ukrainian victory would further weaken Russia's capacity to project power in the region, reducing its ability to manipulate regional politics and maintain its foothold in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. This process of de-imperialization involves recognizing that Moscow should no longer serve as the primary reference point for understanding or managing Eastern European and Eurasian affairs.

As Russia's influence wanes, there is an opportunity for the West to play a more active role in shaping the future of the South Caucasus. The United States and its allies should work to shift the locus of power in the region away from Moscow and towards a framework that involves greater Western and regional cooperation, including further integrating Türkiye as a regional, rules-based actor. This could include enhancing security guarantees, expanding economic and political ties, and supporting regional initiatives that promote stability and integration. A regional approach that limits Russia's influence while empowering local actors would benefit the South Caucasus' long-term stability.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy in the South Caucasus

Given these evolving dynamics, the United States must craft a comprehensive strategy that recognizes the unique opportunities and challenges in the South Caucasus. First, the United States should expand our engagement with Armenia, recognizing it as a democratic partner with the potential for deeper cooperation. This could involve formalizing Armenia's status as a U.S. partner, building on the elevation of the relationship to the level of strategic partnership dialogues that was accomplished earlier this year.¹⁸ Additionally, the United States should lend more sustained and substantial diplomatic weight to Armenia's efforts to normalize relations with Türkiye, finalize a durable peace with Azerbaijan, reduce regional isolation, and diversify its security and economic partnerships.

In Georgia, the U.S. should pursue a strategy that applies conditional pressure on the government while supporting democratic forces and civil society.¹⁹ This approach should make clear that U.S. support is contingent on democratic reforms and a clear pro-Western alignment, consistent with popular demands and the protection of the country's deteriorating democracy. At the same time, the United States should work to strengthen its relationships with the Georgian people, demonstrating a commitment to their aspirations for a democratic and European future. Such a strategy could help bridge the gap between the Georgian government and its populace, fostering a more stable and constructive relationship.

Regarding Azerbaijan, the United States should balance diplomacy and pressure by combining criticism of Baku's human rights record with incentives for cooperation. Washington should convey that closer ties with the West, including access to economic and security benefits, are possible if Azerbaijan commits to reform. This balanced approach would allow the United States to maintain our influence in Baku while encouraging positive changes that could contribute to regional stability.

Finally, the United States should continue and even dramatically increase our robust support for Ukraine, recognizing that a Ukrainian victory is essential for promoting stability in the South Caucasus and the Black Sea region more generally. By supporting Ukraine, the United States helps to weaken Russia's ability to maintain its imperial ambitions, thereby reducing Moscow's influence over the South Caucasus.

A Ukrainian victory would create new opportunities for more independent and diversified alignments among the South Caucasian states, opening the door for greater U.S. and Western engagement in the region.

Another Crossroads

It's become axiomatic to locate the South Caucasus at the geographical as well as proverbial crossroads, but the metaphor may be unusually apt today, between dueling futures where Russian enclosure is achieved, or finally jettisoned. For the United States, this represents both a challenge and an opportunity to redefine its role in the region. By recalibrating our policies to account for the new realities on the ground, supporting democratic movements, and applying strategic pressure where necessary, the U.S. can help foster a more stable, prosperous, and independent South Caucasus. The key to achieving this lies in a multifaceted approach that leverages U.S. influence, supports de facto allies like Ukraine, and promotes democratic governance and human rights throughout the region.

An updated and comprehensive strategy will require careful navigation of the complex and evolving geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. By recognizing the unique opportunities and challenges in each of the three countries—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—the United States can play a pivotal role in shaping a future that aligns with both our strategic interests and the aspirations of the peoples of the South Caucasus.

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022, has dramatically altered the geopolitical dynamics of not only Eastern Europe but also the wider region that includes Türkiye, the Mediterranean Basin, Central Asia and the Caucasus. The conflict has provided Türkiye with both challenges and opportunities, reshaping its relationships with Russia, the West, and countries within Central Asia. Türkiye's role in military support to Ukraine and its increased presence in regional diplomacy have both underscored its growing significance on the world stage. As the war evolves, Türkiye's role will continue to shift, with potential long-term implications for the region even after the war concludes.

Türkiye-Russia Relations in the Context of the War

Türkiye and Russia have historically maintained a complex relationship, rooted in both rivalry and cooperation. Prior to the war in Ukraine, the two nations were partners in several strategic initiatives, such as the TurkStream natural gas pipeline and Russia's nuclear power plant construction in Türkiye. Additionally, Türkiye and Russia have worked closely in managing regional conflicts, most notably in Syria, where despite supporting opposing sides, they have brokered agreements and avoided direct military confrontations.

The outbreak of Russia's war against Ukraine has tested this delicate balancing act. Türkiye's position is unique because it has not severed or limited relations with Russia, choosing instead to maintain trade and economic ties. On the other hand, Türkiye has steadfastly supported Ukraine's territorial integrity with the particular emphasis on the need to end the Russian occupation of Crimea.¹ It has also provided crucial military support to Ukraine, including selling Bayraktar TB2 drones, which have been used effectively by Ukrainian forces against Russian assets.² This dual approach has allowed Türkiye to assert itself as a mediator in the conflict, hosting negotiations between the warring parties and attempting to maintain a neutral stance while still asserting its own strategic interests.

This balancing act has, however, strained relations with Moscow. Russia views Türkiye's military assistance to Ukraine with suspicion, seeing it as a potential threat to its war efforts.

Nevertheless, Moscow is keenly aware of Türkiye's importance in maintaining the energy and trade links that remain vital to the Russian economy, particularly as the impact of Western sanctions increases with time. The dynamic between the two nations has evolved into one of cautious cooperation where mutual interests—such as energy and trade—are prioritized over outright confrontation.

Türkiye's Relationship with the West and NATO

Türkiye's role in Russia's war on Ukraine has also had profound implications for its relationship with the West— particularly with its NATO Allies. Since the start of the war, Türkiye has used its position as a NATO member to reinforce its importance within the alliance, albeit in a manner that asserts its independence. The country has shown that it can act as both a partner and a counterbalance within the alliance, leveraging its geopolitical position and military resources to influence NATO policies regarding the war.

Türkiye's refusal to impose sanctions on Russia has frustrated many of its NATO Allies, while its decision to supply military drones to Ukraine and its pivotal role in negotiations, such as facilitating the grain export deal via the Black Sea, have demonstrated its strategic importance. Additionally, Türkiye's control over the Bosphorus Strait, which links the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, gives it significant leverage in controlling naval access in and out of the conflict zone, further enhancing its importance to both NATO and the West.

The Turkish government's maneuvering between its NATO commitments and its diplomatic ties with Russia is emblematic of its broader foreign policy of balancing between the East and West.³ However, tensions with NATO persist. Issues such as Türkiye's purchase of Russian S-400 missile defense systems and its often-contentious relations with the U.S. and European Union over human rights and internal governance continue to strain relations. While Türkiye eventually approved Finland and Sweden's NATO bids, the amount of time and diplomatic effort it required frustrated many NATO allies. Despite these tensions, the war has highlighted Türkiye's indispensability within NATO, particularly as a military and logistical power in the region.

Military Support to Ukraine

Türkiye's military support to Ukraine has been one of the key aspects of its involvement in the war. The Bayraktar TB2 drones, produced by the Turkish defense company Baykar, have been hailed as game-changers in the conflict. Ukraine's effective use of these drones has raised Türkiye's profile as a leading manufacturer of military technologies and demonstrated the global influence of its defense industry. The sale of these drones to Ukraine, despite Turkish-Russian economic ties, underscores Türkiye's broader strategy of fostering its own defense industry as a means of enhancing its regional power and strategic autonomy.

In addition to drones, Türkiye has provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, sent supplies to help the war-torn civilian population, and offered diplomatic support to Kyiv. This multidimensional support, while politically delicate, has also earned Türkiye a degree of goodwill from Ukraine and its Western backers. However, the provision of military aid to Ukraine, while not officially putting Türkiye in the anti-Russian camp, has nonetheless introduced a competitive edge into Turkish-Russian relations.

Türkiye's Increased Role in Central Asia

The war has also shifted Türkiye's focus toward Central Asia, where it has sought to increase its influence. The region, composed of former Soviet republics with Turkic cultural and linguistic ties to Türkiye, has become more strategically important as Russia's influence there has weakened due to its focus on the war in Ukraine. Türkiye has pursued diplomatic and economic initiatives aimed at strengthening ties with Central Asian states, particularly through organizations such as the Organization of Turkic States, which includes countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan.⁴

Türkiye's economic and cultural diplomacy in Central Asia has been bolstered by the fact that many of these countries are seeking to diversify their foreign relations away from Russian domination. The war in Ukraine has further demonstrated to these nations the potential risks of over-reliance on Russia for security and economic stability. Türkiye has positioned itself as a viable alternative partner, offering trade, investment, and cultural exchange as it seeks to fill some of the gaps left by Russia's waning influence.

Future Implications for Türkiye's Role After the War

Looking ahead, Türkiye's regional role is likely to evolve further as the war in Ukraine eventually comes to an end. The conclusion of hostilities could create new opportunities for Türkiye to assert its influence in post-war reconstruction efforts, particularly in Ukraine, where its military support and mediation efforts have earned it a prominent role. The potential for new economic and political partnerships in the reconstruction phase could also enhance Türkiye's standing on the global stage.

However, the end of the war could also bring challenges. Should Russia emerge weakened, Türkiye may find itself having to navigate a more volatile and competitive environment in Central Asia and the Caucasus, where other powers such as China and the European Union may seek to expand their influence. Conversely, a Russian resurgence after the war could see renewed tensions between Moscow and Ankara, particularly if Russia seeks to reassert its dominance in regions where Türkiye has recently expanded its influence.

At the same time, it appears some of the changes in the Russo-Turkish relations have fundamentally shifted.

While the two countries have always declared their ties as a partnership of equals, it had been apparent Russia had more points of leverage over Türkiye. Whether through banning Turkish imports, trying to influence the Turkish economy by limiting the number of visiting Russian tourists and other means, Russia has always been eager to demonstrate it has an upper hand.

The isolation Russia has faced since the start of its war against Ukraine made it clear it has few counterparts to turn to for its economic, trade and diplomatic needs. Türkiye has used this to try to shift the power dynamic to, for example, negotiate more favorable energy trade deals. Russia's diplomatic rhetoric suggests they are willing to overlook Türkiye's more aggressive stance simply because they cannot afford to lose a counterpart.

In addition, Türkiye's relationship with the West could experience new strains or opportunities depending on the post-war global order. Should Türkiye's balancing act between Russia and NATO prove unsustainable in the long run, Ankara may be forced to choose sides more decisively, which could lead to either a stronger integration with the West or a pivot towards a more independent, and potentially more strained, foreign policy.

U.S. Engagement and Policy Response

Türkiye remains a steadfast NATO ally, and a regional security partner that advances U.S. security interests and is pivotal to resolving conflicts in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and beyond. To that end, the United States should consider adopting the following policy initiatives:

>>> Unequivocal and constant support for Türkiye's European integration aspirations. Türkiye has been an EU aspirant since the early 1980s and has yet to be offered a realistic way of joining the EU or an alternative arrangement that will ease visa restrictions and trade barriers. The disappointment many Turkish citizens feel at the failure to achieve any meaningful policy change feeds into anti-Western sentiment and is a factor in driving the country toward Russia and China.

>>> Dual-track approach to Türkiye's policies in domestic and foreign arenas. The United States should not shy away from being critical of Türkiye's failure to uphold rights and freedoms as enshrined in the Turkish constitution. At the same time, U.S. should not be sparse in its praise of positive changes in the country brought about through democratic resilience or as part of government reform. In an environment of diminished mutual trust, rhetoric matters more than ever.

>>> Recognition of the gravity of Turkish security concerns. In the last three decades, Türkiye has experienced a steady stream of terror attacks that have claimed the lives of many innocent civilians. Explicit and regular acknowledgement of these threats by U.S. and, whenever possible, increasing cooperation to diminish the threats would be one of the strongest ways to enhance the mutual trust.

>>> Support for Türkiye's pan-Turkic initiatives. Since the start of the Russian war against Ukraine, Central Asian states have been steadily pulling away from the Russian orbit; however, they share security, economic and cultural ties with Russia that cannot be easily severed without an alternative partner. Türkiye, due to the cultural and linguistic ties, can offer that alternative. At the same time, strengthened pan-Turkic cooperation enhances Türkiye's political and diplomatic standing. U.S. support for this initiative would achieve a dual objective of strengthening Central Asian sovereignty and supporting Türkiye's regional aspirations.

>>> Improved people-to-people, educational, trade, and business opportunities. The United States offers a wealth of education and business opportunities to people all over the world. In Türkiye, however, these efforts are limited. While this is not a deliberate policy choice, the United States has many opportunities to broaden people-to-people and other cultural exchange avenues. It is a powerful tool that will improve the pro-American and pro-Western sentiment in Türkiye and ensure its long-term future as part of the West.

>>> Counter Russian Disinformation. Türkiye's media landscape is dotted with pro-Kremlin propaganda outlets. They promote anti-American sentiment, provide narratives justifying Russian atrocities in Ukraine and beyond, stoke regional, religious and ethnic divisions. It is important to support the work of independent Turkish media outlets that provide truthful information and use all other instruments in the toolbox to counter Russian disinformation.

Conclusion

Türkiye's role in the Ukraine conflict has been multifaceted, encompassing military support for Ukraine, careful diplomacy with Russia, and a strengthening of its position within NATO. The war has allowed Türkiye to expand its influence, not only in its immediate region but also in Central Asia and Caucasus, as countries there look for alternatives to Russian dominance and Türkiye and Armenia work toward normalizing their relations. Türkiye's ability to balance its relationships with Russia and the West has allowed it to emerge as a key regional power, though this balancing act will continue to test its foreign policy in the years to come.

The end of the war in Ukraine will likely have significant implications for Türkiye's future. Whether through post-war reconstruction efforts, shifts in the geopolitical balance of power, or renewed competition, Türkiye's role will be central in shaping the regional landscape. The country's ability to adapt to these changes will determine whether it continues to rise as a regional leader or faces new challenges in maintaining its influence and strategic position.

BLACK SEA

Russia has viewed the Black Sea as a vital area for projecting power, controlling access to the Mediterranean, and exerting influence over its neighbors. This perspective has been evident in its aggressive actions, from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and ongoing support for separatist movements in Georgia and Moldova. These moves are not isolated incidents but are part of a systematic strategy to challenge the post-Cold War security order in Europe, weaken NATO cohesion, and erode the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity that underpin the international system. The Black Sea region, in this context, serves as both a geographic and strategic fulcrum where Russia seeks to exert leverage against the West.

To effectively counter the long-term threat posed by Russia, the United States must adopt a comprehensive, sustained strategy that recognizes the Black Sea as a critical theater of competition. This involves not only bolstering the military defenses of NATO Allies in the region but also strengthening political, economic, and informational resilience among Black Sea states. A long-term approach should prioritize building a credible deterrent to Russian aggression, supporting democratic governance and rule of law, and fostering regional cooperation frameworks that limit Russia's ability to exploit divisions and vulnerabilities. The U.S. must maintain its commitment to countering Russian influence in this strategically vital region to ensure that it does not become a staging ground for further Russian expansionism or a point of weakness that undermines broader Euro-Atlantic security.

Emergent Challenges

The Black Sea has long lacked a distinct strategic identity within U.S. foreign policy, often seen more as a peripheral area than a standalone focal point. In contrast, other maritime regions in Europe have received consistent attention and resources from Washington. The Eastern Mediterranean, for instance, has been a theater of active U.S. military operations and numerous security agreements, reflecting its strategic importance to U.S. interests in the Middle East and Europe.¹ Similarly, the Caspian and Baltic Seas have been integral to U.S. energy security strategies and NATO defense postures, given their proximity to Russia and the critical role they play in transatlantic security.²³⁴

However, recent developments in the Black Sea region have highlighted the need for a more robust and coherent U.S. strategy. The region's strategic importance has been brought into sharp focus by Russia's aggressive actions, including the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the ongoing military aggression in Ukraine, as well as its broader destabilizing activities across Eastern Europe. These actions have prompted a reassessment of the U.S. approach to the Black Sea and have led to calls for a comprehensive policy framework that addresses both immediate security concerns and longer-term strategic objectives. Recent legislative mandates, including those in the FY2023 and FY2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), have prompted some efforts to address the emerging threat environment, but these efforts have achieved limited success in defining a comprehensive U.S. strategy for the region.⁵

The Strategic Context of the Black Sea Region

The Black Sea region is frequently characterized as a geopolitical "crossroads" or "bridge" between different empires, cultures, and continents. While this is true in many respects, these terms do not fully capture the region's intrinsic strategic value.⁶ Historically, the Black Sea has been a locus of power struggles among regional and global powers, including the Greek and Roman Empires, the Ottoman Empire, Tsarist Russia, and the Soviet Union. Each of these powers has sought to control or influence the Black Sea to project power, secure trade routes, and maintain regional dominance.

The Black Sea remains a contested space, shaped by a continuous struggle between forces favoring regional openness and those seeking political and military enclosure.⁷⁸ Russia, which maintains significant military presence and influence, is openly contested by regional powers such as Türkiye and is closely watched by NATO members. The region is further characterized by a complex network of overlapping security architectures, including NATO, the European Union (EU), and the Russia-led CSTO, which creates an environment prone to conflict and instability. The absence of a unified and coherent security architecture exacerbates this volatility, leaving space for regional actors to pursue divergent and often conflicting interests. A more robust and proactive strategy is needed to secure U.S. interests and ensure regional stability.

Current U.S. Policy Landscape and Challenges

U.S. engagement in the Black Sea region has traditionally been limited, shaped by a minimal force posture and a reactive policy approach. U.S. policy has largely been dictated by NATO's collective defense framework and the need to reassure allies in the face of Russian aggression. This approach to the Black Sea is characterized by several challenges that undermine its effectiveness. First, the region's fragmented security environment makes it difficult to implement a cohesive policy.

While Romania, Bulgaria, and Türkiye are NATO members, and thus covered by the Alliance's collective defense guarantees, other Black Sea states, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, do not benefit from such formal security assurances. Neither NATO members nor Euro-Atlantic partners form internally coherent blocs. Meanwhile, Russia's control over occupied territories in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova further complicates the security landscape, creating a patchwork of competing security frameworks.

Several states subsist within the gaps of these competing architectures: Ukraine and Georgia are formal NATO aspirants and, along with Moldova, EU candidate states; Armenia is tightly wound into Russian security structures but openly seeking escape velocity westward; Azerbaijan has increasingly spurned Euro-Atlantic integration and recently signaled closer relations with Moscow. Russia and other authoritarian adversaries exploit these crevices between and among competing security systems. It is there where conflict erupts and generalized instability radiates. Ukraine is an especially tragic example of the limits of the prevailing norms in the absence of a viable enforcement architecture.

However, U.S. strategic objectives in the Black Sea remain ambiguous. While there are ongoing efforts to strengthen bilateral relations with regional partners, these initiatives often lack a unified strategic framework that integrates political, military, economic, and diplomatic tools. The absence of a clear vision for U.S. engagement in the Black Sea undermines the coherence of policy efforts and creates uncertainty among regional allies and partners.

A related challenge is a potentially insufficient U.S. force posture and a perceived variable commitment to the region. The U.S. military presence in the Black Sea has been comparatively modest, oriented primarily towards reassurance rather than a robust or credible conventional deterrence posture. This limited presence falls short of the requirements needed to counter Russian aggression and provide a viable security umbrella to NATO allies and partners in the region. As such, the U.S. policy approach to Black Sea security has been largely reactive, driven by immediate crises rather than long-term strategic planning. To achieve a more effective policy approach, the U.S. must shift from a reactive to a proactive stance, focusing on long-term strategic objectives and the means to achieve them.

A Strategic Framework for U.S. Engagement in the Black Sea

To address these challenges, a comprehensive U.S. strategy for the Black Sea should be developed around several key elements.

First, we should articulate a clear set of strategic objectives for the Black Sea region, aligned with broader U.S. foreign policy goals.

These objectives should prioritize maintaining regional stability, supporting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Black Sea states, and promoting Euro-Atlantic integration for willing partners. A clearly articulated strategy would help to align U.S. policy efforts, enhance coordination with allies and partners, and ensure a consistent approach to addressing regional security challenges.

Secondly, in coordination with partners and allies, the United States should establish a region-wide security architecture. Ideally, this would involve extending NATO membership to aspirants, in line with historical intent.⁹ If this is politically untenable, another option would be an integrated architecture between NATO and a secondary system to bring non-NATO partners closer. A secondary framework could build on the proliferation of “minilateral” security cooperation efforts.^{10,11} It could involve the establishment of a regional security forum or task force that brings together like-minded Black Sea states, including Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, to coordinate efforts on maritime security, counter terrorism, and address hybrid threats. A more ambitious version could scale the G7 Ukraine security guarantee model to a more formal, and legislatively codified, alliance status that is substantial on its own but also serves as a credible pathway to NATO—something akin to the Major Democratic Alliance concept.¹² This would also include strengthening existing regional security partnerships. This involves deepening practical security cooperation with Black Sea littoral states that include enhanced military exercises, intelligence sharing, arms sales, and capacity-building initiatives.

Another critical element of a comprehensive U.S. strategy for the Black Sea is enhancing deterrence through a forward military presence. A more robust and permanent U.S. military presence in the region is essential to deterring Russian aggression and reassuring allies. This could involve pre-positioning equipment and supplies, enhancing naval capabilities, and deploying additional missile defense systems in the region. More creative solutions for surging capabilities to the region, such as by greater employment of positioning assets via the Danube river delta, have also been proposed by regional advocates. Additionally, the U.S. should consider increasing the number of rotational deployments of U.S. forces in the Black Sea, as well as establishing permanent forces.

The U.S. should also focus on promoting economic and energy security in the Black Sea region. Economic resilience is a critical component of overall regional stability. To better compete with Russian and increasingly Chinese geoeconomic efforts, the United States should extend and expand our participation in the Three Seas Initiative, which has become an increasingly potent focal point for regional integration and strategic economic cooperation.¹³ Relatedly, impact-focused, strategic, and longitudinal investments through U.S. assistance and development efforts can serve as a kind of U.S.-led “bank” for strategic competition in the region to provide palatable alternatives to adversaries’ economic incursions and, perhaps more critically, help establish enduring economic linkages between the U.S., Europe, and regional partners.

Furthermore, the U.S. must enhance its efforts to counter Russian influence and disinformation in the Black Sea region. Russia has consistently employed a range of tools, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and support for political proxies, to undermine the stability and sovereignty of Black Sea states. To counter these malign activities, the U.S. should provide targeted support to independent media, civil society organizations, and government institutions in the region.

Lastly, the United States should consider “hardwiring” a Black Sea focus into its policies and programming. While ad hoc efforts such as the Helsinki Commission’s multilateral 2022 Black Sea Security Summit and NDAA-mandated reporting have drawn attention and injected energy into the discussion around Black Sea affairs, they have thus far done more to demonstrate congressional intent than appreciably drive U.S. government policy as a whole.¹⁴ Instead, permanent advisory mechanisms on Black Sea security should be considered. For example, a special envoy or special advisor office on Black Sea security affairs in the State Department or in an interagency environment like the National Security Council is more than warranted given the reality of long-term strategic competition in this theater. For its part, Congress could also consider creating a legislative or independent commission, or select committee or subcommittee, on Black Sea security affairs to ensure Congress’ voice, attentions, and priorities on the Black Sea region are maintained for the long term.

Getting it Right

The development of a coherent and strategic U.S. policy towards the Black Sea is not merely an option but an imperative, given Russian aggression, growing Chinese assertiveness, and enduring threats by rogue states and non-state elements. The Black Sea has implications that go beyond its littoral, but also impact broader Euro-Atlantic security. In order to protect U.S. interests and contribute to a stable and secure Europe, it is essential that the United States articulates a clear, integrated vision for engagement in the Black Sea region.

OSCE

In August 1975, the heads of state or government of 35 countries from across Europe, the Soviet Union, the United States, and Canada held a summit in Helsinki, Finland, where they signed the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. In freely undertaking the commitments of The Helsinki Final Act, States established a unique process for conducting dialogue, ensuring accountability, and developing and sharing tools to prevent, manage, and resolve conflict within and among States. The Helsinki Final Act's pioneering and comprehensive concept of security set a rigorous standard for States' conduct of politico-military affairs, in economic and environmental cooperation, and on human rights and humanitarian concerns. Violations of these commitments, States concluded, threatened common security and as such were not merely domestic issues but rather issues of common concern.

Today, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the successor organization to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, is the world's largest regional security organization. Based in Vienna, Austria, OSCE includes 57 participating States and 11 partner States, spanning North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Aided by the establishment of formal OSCE institutions and field missions, States have developed powerful tools to review, implement, and demand accountability to achieve the promises of stability, peace, and fundamental freedoms for the more than one billion people who live in the OSCE region—"from Vancouver to Vladivostok."

For decades, Vladimir Putin has been a malign and destabilizing actor inside Russia, across the OSCE region, and within OSCE itself. He has violated each of Russia's commitments under The Helsinki Final Act from suppressing human rights and cultivating a caste of kleptocrats within Russia, to military occupation of neighboring Moldova and Georgia, and to waging hybrid warfare on Europe and the United States. Russia's full-scale war of aggression launched against Ukraine in February 2022 is the most obvious and violent evidence of Putin's willingness to cast aside the international rules-based order to consolidate power at home and establish dominance over Russia's near abroad.

OSCE, with its broad geographical participation and robust concept of security, is a vital platform for the United States to contest Russia, advance national and regional security priorities, reverse the region's democratic backsliding, ensure Russian accountability, and bolster allies like Ukraine.

Indeed, Russia's war against Ukraine and its hostility towards OSCE itself has prompted States to creatively reinvigorate how OSCE delivers on its mandates of democracy promotion and accountability. Ultimately, OSCE is poised also to be the forum where, together with its allies, the United States can meaningfully reengage with Russia when it ends its aggression and rededicates itself to its commitments.

OSCE: Bolstering Democracy, Engaging Nations in Transit

A vital element of contesting Russia includes deterring other leaders from emulating Putin's bad example. The democratic future of an alarming number of OSCE States is uncertain. According to Freedom House's *Nations in Transit* report for 2023, the OSCE region's trends towards illiberalism, nationalism, and authoritarianism continued for the 23rd year in a row.¹ A staggering eight OSCE States were assessed to be "Fully Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes" including Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, and the five Central Asian countries. Another 11 OSCE States are ranked as "Transitional or Hybrid Regimes," including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Hungary, and Serbia. Freedom House is clear: "To counter the gains that authoritarians have made over the last 20 years, democratic governments must broaden their approach to democracy promotion."²

Over the decades, the United States has been instrumental not only in defending OSCE commitments, but also in elaborating on them to address emergent threats, including those posed by Putin's Russia. For example, the United States helped to prescribe OSCE States' commitment to free and fair elections, recognized the threats posed by hate-based conspiracies such as antisemitism, but also the need to protect human rights defenders, political prisoners, and space for civil society to operate. The United States should look to OSCE as a forum to develop and implement tools to counter emerging threats, including those posed by Russia such as disinformation, active measures which undermine democratic institutions, and the weaponization of artificial intelligence.

With its broad-based membership and shared democratic and human rights-based commitments, OSCE is an important democracy-promotion forum wherein the United States can engage not only its allies, but also States that must be enlisted in the battle against Putin's efforts to spread authoritarianism. Because OSCE's missions are led and jointly paid for by multilateral contingents rather than by American staff and funding alone, OSCE offers cost-effective and unique opportunities to engage meaningfully on sensitive issues of mutual concern with States struggling to manage the twin specters of Russian reliance and Russian aggression.

As long as Russia remains in OSCE, the United States should strive to counter its malign influence there. An OSCE lacking strong U.S. engagement risks ceding the space to actors who, if left unchecked, would use it to promulgate and normalize anti-democratic agendas.

Additionally, building or recreating new forums with the goal of achieving the same security, democratic and human rights goals would be costly, result in less comprehensive commitments, and lack the OSCE's far-reaching accountability mechanisms. Putin, and those who would seek to emulate him, must neither be given a free pass to colonize multilateral spaces nor to act with impunity.

OSCE: Countering Russian Aggression with Resilience, Adaptability, and Renewed Efficacy

Ever a source of instability within and among States, Putin has also actively sought to disrupt OSCE itself. Russia's delegation to the OSCE in Vienna has worked to block the adoption of the organization's budget, refused to pay its dues, seized OSCE officials and stolen OSCE property, attempted to curb the independence of its main human rights body, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), and abused OSCE rules which require consensus to convene statutory meetings such as the annual, human rights accountability conference, known formally as the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM).³

Russia's various and sustained efforts to hamstring OSCE, however, have been surprisingly ineffective. OSCE's various bodies sustained and adapted their activities following Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including the Permanent Council, the Forum for Security Cooperation, the Representative on Freedom of the Media, the High Commissioner on National Minorities, and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.⁴ States have used every OSCE forum to document Russia's crimes in Ukraine and its status as a pariah State and to arrange diplomatic and programmatic support to Ukraine. Separately, on a daily basis, and in a dozen countries across the region, OSCE field missions continue to deliver institution-strengthening programming in cooperation with host countries, civil society, and ODIHR. OSCE also deploys approximately ten missions annually to observe and report on the conduct of elections and continues to partner with other international organizations like the Council of Europe to improve States' ability to pass model legislation and to combat terrorism, corruption, and trafficking in human beings. After being forced to close three separate missions to Ukraine in 2021 due to the Russian delegation's obstructionism, OSCE has since launched a Support Programme for Ukraine (SPU),⁵ delivering programs which include increasing Ukraine's capacity to address psychological trauma caused by war, humanitarian demining, addressing chemical threats, and monitoring of environmental damage from the war. In December 2023, Russia joined consensus to appoint Malta as OSCE's Chair-in-Office for 2024, just as it had previously agreed that Finland would take lead the organization in 2025. Talks are currently underway to appoint the organization's top administrators.

Ironically, Russia's hostility towards the organization has stimulated new and creative thinking by States on how to more effectively deliver on OSCE's mandates.

In direct response to Russia's efforts to block the adoption of the consensus-dependent Unified Budget and Russia's successful bid to suspend consensus-based operations in Ukraine, the United States and others ended OSCE's near-total reliance on consensus-based funding and staffing mechanisms in favor of robust use of existing mechanisms which do not require consensus, such as Extra-Budgetary projects and Chair-hosted events. In so doing, OSCE has remained a forum where work of particular importance to the United States' foreign policy objectives continues—despite Russia's objections. Notably, this includes OSCE work to hold Russia accountable for its actions in Ukraine, organizing the HDIM (restyled as the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference), and the abovementioned reestablishment of activities in Ukraine.

Russia's aggression has also reinvigorated the significance of OSCE as a platform for dialog. Whereas previously OSCE's value was framed in terms of the power of having the U.S., EU, and Russia at the same table, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine led the United States to understand OSCE's value as an existent, in-person, and high-level setting to counter Russian aggression in real time. Even as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began to unfold, the United States Mission to OSCE readily convened a series of high-level briefings with likeminded States to review what was known about Russia's actions and to coordinate both OSCE and national responses in support of Ukraine.

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Russia's aggression also energized OSCE's reporting, go-and-see, and convening mechanisms established to rapidly and cost-effectively document violations of Helsinki Final Act commitments with the longer-term purpose of enhancing States' accountability. Already on March 22, 2022, OSCE released a 108-page report documenting thousands of actions by Russian troops and proxies in and around Ukraine which may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Teams of experts, tasked under one of OSCE's human rights accountability agreements, also known as the Moscow Mechanism, have since produced hundreds of additional pages of documentation across five separate reports which document widespread cases including torture, forcible adoption, and attacks on civilian infrastructure.⁶ Separately, OSCE's ODIHR has compiled five reports on *Reported Violations of International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law in Ukraine*.⁷

The latest, issued in July 2024, enumerated war crimes by Russian troops and their proxies, including the shelling of civilian populations, the use of sexual violence and summary executions.⁸ Under OSCE's auspices, the United States, Ukraine, Lithuania, and others convened a weekly speaker series in Vienna hosting a variety of experts and eyewitnesses, including Ukrainian officials, representatives of international organizations and civil society, freed political prisoners, medics, and survivors of Russian torture and filtration. The written reports and personal testimonies documented by OSCE and shared with States' capitals were among the earliest and most detailed, exposing conditions on the ground areas of Ukraine temporarily occupied by Russia. OSCE's unique convening power was instrumental in informing and consolidating States' resolve to ensure Ukraine's victory and to deal Russia a strategic defeat. By documenting the horrors endured by Ukrainians subject to and fleeing Russia's war, OSCE also assisted Ukraine and the international community to be better prepared to protect and support them. Going forward, the goal is for OSCE-generated documentation be used by Ukraine's Prosecutor General and other bodies, such as the International Criminal Court, to seek accountability for the perpetrators.

Finally, OSCE's value as a premier security forum is apparent by Russia's own actions. Despite being reviled, isolated, and ineffectual, and the anemic effort it periodically makes to paint the organization as "an absolutely dependent, politicized organization dancing to Washington's tune," Russia continues to prize its seat at the OSCE table. It continues to staff meetings when is permitted to do so and complains bitterly when its delegates are denied visas to attend meetings hosted by States who seek to hold it accountable for its crimes. Twice in 2024 has Russia publicly threatened to withdraw from OSCE's Parliamentary Assembly.^{9,10} The most recent of these threats was issued in July, wherein members of the Russian Senate and State Duma declared it "reasonable and legitimate" to suspend their participation, was sharply rebuked in a letter from the Finnish President of OSCE Parliamentary Assembly who countered, in essence, that instead of persisting in its failure to meet its commitments, Russia should instead withdraw immediately from Ukraine, pay its contributions to OSCE's budget, and rejoin the community of nations.^{11,12} While one can assume that Russia continues to be willing to play the spoiler within OSCE, it has yet to rebut the President's assessment of the current state of affairs and continues to show up at meetings in Vienna.

OSCE: A Roadmap to Rejoining the Community of Nations

With robust U.S. leadership, OSCE has transformed from a consensus-based forum for dialogue into a post-consensus accountability platform which draws upon political commitments, institutions, and field missions to isolate Russia, bolster support for Ukraine, challenge the region's widespread, democratic backsliding, and champion deeply held commitments to human rights.



SMM Ukraine stands in front of OSCE convoy. (OSCE SMM Ukraine X)

Despite Russia's various attempts to suppress it, OSCE has proved an adaptable and resilient platform to advance U.S. national and security interests in Europe, build and reinforce bridges to States in transit, and to document Russia's crimes, thereby increasing the likelihood of achieving justice for Ukraine. Paradoxically, Russia's hostility toward OSCE appears to have stimulated new and creative thinking about how States could leverage OSCE mechanisms to develop and deliver practical tools to enhance resilience to Russia's malign influence.

By committing to continued, robust engagement in the organization, the United States can defend OSCE as an important, democracy-promotion forum, rebuff the efforts of Putin and other autocrats who would seek to normalize their illiberal agendas, and to counter emerging security threats. OSCE's value as a platform for dialog includes the ability to strategize with allies to contest Russia in real time but also in communicating the importance of adopting U.S.-led initiatives to enhance the region's security, including recognizing Russia's genocide in Ukraine and adopting U.S. Helsinki Commission-backed sanctions regimes like Global Magnitsky and the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity (REPO) for Ukrainians Act, which seek to end corruption, target human rights abusers, and achieve justice for Ukraine.¹³¹⁴¹⁵

On September 17, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman and Helsinki Commission Co-Chair, Senator Ben Cardin hosted an event during which he and others celebrated the release of Russian historian and pro-democracy activist, Vladimir Kara-Murza from 844 days in Russian detention. Undeterred by years in isolation and two assassination attempts by poisoning, Kara-Murza concluded his remarks by reaffirming his unwavering belief in the importance of helping Russia to achieve its Helsinki commitments:

"I am firmly and fundamentally convinced—always have been but never as strongly as I am now—that the only way that we will be able to achieve long-term peace, stability, security, and democracy on the European continent will be with a peaceful, free, and democratic Russia as a part of that equation. When that day comes, it will not be just in the interest of us Russian citizens, that goes without saying; but very much in the interest of Ukraine, of Belarus, and all of our neighbors in Europe and the entire world, including here in the United States... I very much look forward to working together with all of you... to try to bring that day just a little closer."¹⁶

Hopefully, there will be a time when Russia's leadership embraces democratic values and rule of law and seeks in good faith to rejoin the community of nations. When it does, OSCE's comprehensive security framework provides a roadmap for restoring trust within and among States, grounded in a shared commitment to accountability, democracy, and human rights.

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