



SEPTEMBER 2020 | THE RETURN OF GLOBAL RUSSIA

# There Goes the Neighborhood: The Limits of Russian Integration in Eurasia

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## Summary

Since 2014, Russia has redoubled its efforts to build a sphere of influence, operating frequently under the flag of Eurasian integration. Its undeclared war in Ukraine and hardball tactics vis-à-vis other neighbors demonstrate the lengths to which it is willing to go to undermine their independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Moscow has pushed hard to expand the membership and functions of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the formal vehicle for cross-regional integration of political and economic activity. However, Russia's limited economic resources and lack of soft-power appeal; the engagement with the region by other outside powers, including the European Union, China, Turkey, and the United States; and societal change in neighboring states are creating significant long-term obstacles to the success of Russian neo-imperialist ambitions and exposing a large gap between its ends and means.

Russia's ambitions in Eurasia are buffeted by unfavorable trends that are frequently overlooked by analysts and policymakers. Russia's own heavy-handed behavior contributes to both regional upheaval and instability as well as to the creation of diplomatic headwinds that constrain its own room for maneuver. For example,

- The ongoing popular outcry in Belarus about election fraud may not have an inherently anti-Russian flavor, but Alexander Lukashenko's government has long resisted Russia's push for closer integration and sought to expand its ties to the West. The vast majority of Belarusians oppose full unification with Russia.
- Armenia—long one of Russia's closest allies—has been redefining that relationship in the wake of the 2018 Velvet Revolution in which civil society activists overthrew a Russia-friendly regime. Today, Armenians increasingly resent Russian control over key industries and doubt Moscow's reliability as an ally.
- China continues to rapidly expand its important economic presence not only in Central Asia but in other parts of Eurasia as well.
- New generations of leaders and citizens throughout Eurasia no longer look to Russia as an attractive geopolitical, cultural, or economic center. They have much wider horizons—in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

- Although the EAEU is the most influential Russian-dominated multilateral institution in the region, Moscow has not been able to attract new members since it was launched in 2015. The union suffers from internal discord, and Russia has not been able to impose its will on its other members.

Despite these trends, Russia remains an unpredictable and aggressive power in Eurasia. Squeezed between it and China, the region's states have to tread carefully and to chart their ties with the West, which Russia especially considers a threat to its interests, with caution.

The United States should remain engaged in Eurasia and develop tailored strategies for engaging with Russia's neighbors, while remaining aware that some are more able to engage in a constructive partnership with the West than others, based on their dependence on Moscow. The United States should recognize that Russian malign activities and influence are one source of instability in Eurasia. State fragility is another. The United States should pursue strategies that prioritize working with allies and partners to help Eurasian states deal successfully with both challenges.

## Introduction

For Russia, restoring its influence in the countries of Eurasia has been a top foreign policy priority virtually since the day the Soviet Union broke up. It has relied on all instruments of national power—diplomatic, information, military, and economic—in pursuit of that goal. In the wake of its aggression against Ukraine, Moscow has intensified these efforts, attempting to draw a sharp “us vs. them” line around its desired sphere of influence around its periphery and to undermine neighbors that seek closer ties with the West.

Yet, in the six years since the start of Russia’s war with Ukraine, the gap between its neo-imperial ambitions and its ability to fulfill them has become more conspicuous, even as worries about Russia have multiplied throughout the region. That gap is growing. The collateral costs of aggression against Ukraine are proving to be unexpectedly high, often hampering Russia’s ability to achieve more than symbolic gains. Across Eurasia, governments and societies were shocked by the war against Ukraine. The Kremlin’s rhetoric and thinly veiled threats stirred fears that Ukraine’s fate may befall Russia’s other neighbors. Keenly aware that geography limits their ability to break free from Russia’s orbit, most of its neighbors have nonetheless tried to hedge against the threat of its aggression. They have quietly reinvigorated ties with partners in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East; taken steps to diversify their economic ties; and developed strategies to reduce Russia’s cultural and media influence inside their borders.

Russia’s ambitions have been kept in check not only by its limited resources and its neighbors’ quiet resistance, but also by underappreciated changes in the demographics and geopolitics of Eurasia. Generational change; fading memories of a shared Soviet past; and access to information as well as cultural and educational resources in Europe, the United States, and Asia have been gradually transforming these post-Soviet countries. The entry into the region of actors other than Russia—most notably, China, the European Union, the United States, and Middle Eastern states—has expanded the range of options for diversifying their foreign policies. As a result of these changes, Russia’s ambitions in Eurasia far exceed its grasp.

This paper explores the evolving relationship between Russia and its neighbors. It examines Russia’s ambitions, the toolkit it has relied on in pursuing these ambitions, and the actions taken by its neighbors to resist it. The paper puts the spotlight on the changing demographics of Eurasian countries as well as their expanding diplomatic and geopolitical horizons. It concludes with implications for U.S. interests and policy recommendations.



## Fear Spreads in Eurasia

The shock of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 raised concerns about its neo-imperial ambitions throughout a vast and highly diverse neighborhood. Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Moldova, as well as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia found themselves on the list of potential targets of Russian military incursions or destabilization efforts. Proximity to Russia, the presence of ethnic Russian populations, and unresolved regional conflicts, including some directly involving Moscow, made different countries vulnerable to Russian aggression in one form or another.<sup>1</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin's embrace of expansive nationalism to justify the Crimean annexation and the use of irregular proxies to destabilize Ukraine were deeply troubling. During his previous presidential terms, his popularity had largely rested on a track record of economic growth and rising living standards. But with Russia's economy slowing down, Putin's intervention in Ukraine provided the regime with a new source of political legitimacy at home while raising fears among Russia's neighbors that he might need similarly audacious "wins" to sustain it.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the illegal annexation of Crimea caused Putin's popularity to soar to over 85 percent from just over 60 percent, where it had been for years, was widely seen as validating this assessment.<sup>3</sup>

In Georgia, which was still reeling from the consequences of the 2008 war with Russia, the aggression against Ukraine prompted renewed concerns of another conflict with its vastly more powerful neighbor.<sup>4</sup> Russia's militarization of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the two breakaway regions of the country that it backs, is a permanent threat to the security of Georgia.<sup>5</sup> Further cementing ties, Russia signed the Treaty of Alliance and Integration with South Ossetia in 2015.<sup>6</sup> There were similar concerns in Moldova, where Russia's military presence in the breakaway Transnistria region is seen as a potential lever the Kremlin could use to destabilize the rest of the country. Russian support also facilitated the victory of the pro-Russia Igor Dodon in Moldova's 2016 presidential election.<sup>7</sup> He has since emerged as a leading EU-skeptic and advocate of closer ties with Russia.

The alarm also rang in Kazakhstan. Like Ukraine, the country received security assurances—but not guarantees—from the United States and the United Kingdom, as signatories of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in return for giving up parts of the Soviet nuclear arsenal located on its territory.<sup>8</sup> The West's unwillingness to defend Ukraine left Kazakh political elites and some members of the public questioning their country's relationship with Russia.<sup>9</sup> Given the significant ethnic Russian population in northern Kazakhstan and a history of Russian meddling there, Kazakhs worried their country could be an easy target for the next phase of Moscow's neo-imperialist expansion.<sup>10</sup> Putin added to these concerns in the summer of 2014, when he said that Kazakhstan was an artificial state created after the Soviet Union's collapse on "territory where no state ever existed previously."<sup>11</sup>

## Back to the USSR?

Russia's desire to regain its hold on Eurasia is not a recent phenomenon. Having barely retreated from Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia in 1991, it almost immediately launched a new campaign to regain the lost ground. That same year, right after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—a loose association of former Soviet states. In 1992, it created the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—a Russian-dominated military alliance that over time became the Kremlin's counter to NATO. Moscow instigated or took advantage of a host of regional conflicts to shore up its leverage and security influence. In 1996, it launched a “union state” with Belarus.

Russia has also sought to sustain and expand economic ties with the former Soviet states, starting with the Customs Union Agreement in 1995. That agreement launched a long quest to establish a Russian-dominated trading zone that gradually evolved into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Putin personally took ownership of that project from 2012. His stated goal for the EAEU was to create a Russian-led trading bloc and counterweight to the European Union (EU). In 2013, under Russian pressure, Armenia decided not to sign an already negotiated association agreement with the EU. A similar decision by Ukraine's president at the time, Viktor Yanukovich, ultimately led to that country's “revolution of dignity” in 2014 and the subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea.<sup>12</sup>

Russia continued its efforts to breathe life into the EAEU as it stepped up its military pressure on Ukraine. With the West imposing sanctions and curtailing contacts, it needed a diplomatic win to demonstrate that these efforts to isolate it were failing. The Kremlin thus pushed Belarus and Kazakhstan to sign the EAEU Treaty. After their respective presidents, Alexander Lukashenko and Nursultan Nazarbayev, pushed back to strip away any hint at political integration from the draft treaty—including Russian calls for a common parliament, border force, foreign policy, and currency—the treaty came into force on January 1, 2015. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined later that same year.

The EAEU has emerged as a symbol of Russia's ambitions that no former Soviet state can afford to ignore. But Moscow thus far has not been able to add further members to the EAEU. Moldova, which has signed an association agreement with the EU, and Uzbekistan, Central Asia's most populous state, continue to resist Russian pressure to join and remain instead EAEU “observers.”<sup>13</sup> Even Tajikistan, which is highly dependent on remittances from labor migrants in Russia, has repeatedly deferred joining the union.<sup>14</sup>

Russia and Kazakhstan, the two economic heavyweights in Eurasia, have derived some economic benefits from preferential trade agreements. But the much poorer EAEU members—Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan—have not fared as well. Moscow offered discounted energy sales, access to labor markets, and other economic enticements to these countries to join the EAEU. These benefits have been often lost to corruption schemes, however, which has raised questions from the public in the member states about the advantages of EAEU membership.<sup>15</sup> The EAEU also suffers from disagreements among members over trade and regulatory regimes, which Russia often seeks to exploit in one-sided fashion. Heavy-handed Russian attempts at closer integration create self-reinforcing cycles of resistance and foot-dragging from other members. While the EAEU has become an established actor in the region, it is far from a happy union.<sup>16</sup>

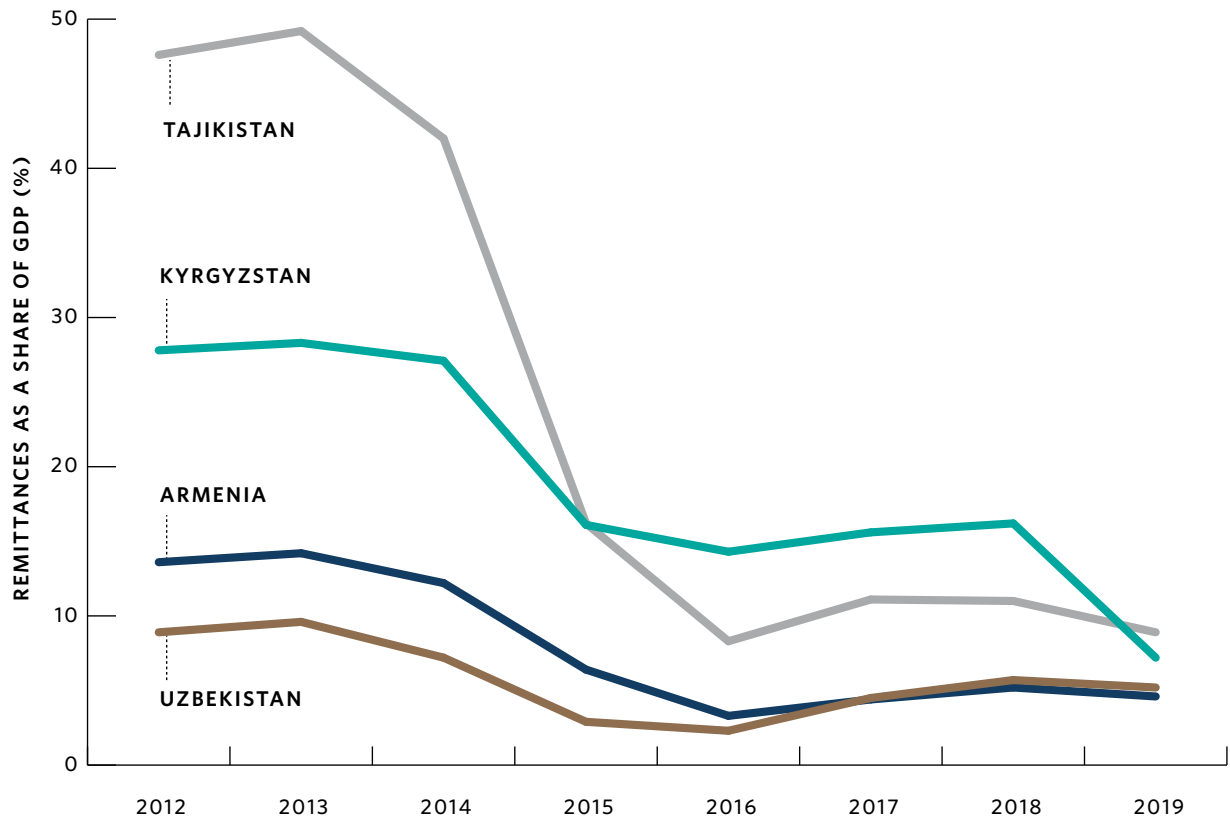
## Russia's Integration Toolkit

The slow-burn conflict in eastern Ukraine is presently the only instance where Russia continues to rely on its military as the primary means of projecting power and influence in a neighboring country. In others, it uses a combination of diplomatic engagement, cultural links, and economic and energy ties.

Russia sees its interests in the region as secure for now. Its war against Ukraine has made clear both to neighbors and outside powers active in the region that it is willing to use force to protect its interests there. Since then, Russia has experienced just a few destabilizing political crises in the region that could threaten its equities. Yet, when the 2018 Velvet Revolution toppled Armenia's Russia-friendly government, Moscow opted to remain on the sidelines, calculating correctly that it had enough economic and security influence in the country to keep the new democratic government from aligning too closely with the West. Although Russian intervention in the 2020 Belarus political crisis is certainly possible, Moscow thus far has sought to avoid fostering a groundswell of anti-Russian sentiment inside the country. At the same time, the fact that the street protests in that country are not anti-Russian in nature and that the Lukashenko regime's violent crackdown on civil society has stymied its budding reconciliation with the West is probably not lost on anyone in the Kremlin.<sup>17</sup> As long as Belarus remains oriented in foreign and security policy toward Russia, the Kremlin is likely to see its interests there as fairly secure.

Russia has relied on discounted energy and weapons sales, debt relief, debt-for-asset swaps, and migrant labor to sustain its sphere of influence.<sup>18</sup> As Figure 1 demonstrates, most former Soviet states are still dependent on remittances from migrant laborers in Russia. In the run-up to the Ukraine conflict, Moscow threatened to cut these countries' access to the Russian labor market in order to get their governments to align more closely with it. Russia's isolated and impoverished neighbors have few other

FIGURE 1  
**Remittances From Russia as Part of a Country's GDP (2012-2019)**



**SOURCE:** Central Bank of Russia, World Bank, Ministry of Economic Development and Poverty Reduction of Uzbekistan, National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyzstan, National Statistical Committee of Armenia, Agency for Statistics under the President of Tajikistan

options, and it is not shy about exploiting their predicament. However, its own sluggish economy and relatively modest resources act as a brake on its ambitions. The reliance of the region’s poorest states on remittances from Russia, measured as a percentage of their gross domestic product, has fallen sharply since 2014, in large part due to Russia’s recent track record poor economic performance.

### Belarus—Disunion in the Union State

Belarus is the most striking example of a former Soviet country that has tried to keep Russia at arm’s length, although the regime’s growing dependence on Moscow since the August 2020 protests could enhance Russia’s leverage. Between 2014 and 2020, after many years of acrimony with the West over accusations of his poor human rights record and after Russian meddling in the country’s internal affairs, Lukashenko launched a détente with the West. He called the annexation of Crimea a “bad precedent” and offered Minsk as neutral ground for mediation and negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.<sup>19</sup>

Lukashenko welcomed the then U.S. national security adviser, John Bolton, to Minsk in 2019 and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in 2020.<sup>20</sup> These visits paved the way for Minsk and Washington to agree to exchange ambassadors for the first time in a decade. These were clear signs of the post-2014 effort to expand the range of Belarus's diplomatic options.<sup>21</sup>

The Belarusian economy remains heavily dependent on subsidized Russian energy to keep its outdated Soviet-era industries going. A transit state for Russian oil and gas to Europe, Belarus also earns roughly \$2 billion annually from refining and re-exporting Russian oil.<sup>22</sup> The country's dependence on cheap Russian hydrocarbons gives Moscow leverage, which it has exploited for almost two decades to entice Minsk into deeper integration.<sup>23</sup>

However, Lukashenko had been relatively successful in resisting Russian pressure for a closer union. Disagreements over oil and gas prices have become a permanent feature of the countries' relationship, resolved periodically with the help of presidential summits. In a clever political ploy intended to shore up his domestic political standing, since 2014 Lukashenko positioned himself as a champion of Belarusian independence and sovereignty in the face of growing pressure from Russia.

Lukashenko was audacious in deploying the nationalist card to deflect Russia's push for closer integration. In response to Moscow halting oil exports to Belarus in early 2020, he pledged to make the country less dependent on Russian oil and replace it with imports from Norway, Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.<sup>24</sup> These efforts at diversification and undercutting Russian leverage likely come too late to truly reduce dependence on Russian hydrocarbons, but Minsk will likely continue looking for alternatives. In May 2020, Pompeo announced the first shipment of U.S. oil to Belarus.<sup>25</sup> Lukashenko has also reached out to China, securing \$15 billion in credits to the Belarusian Development Bank and a \$500 million loan from the China Development Bank in 2019.<sup>26</sup>

In 2019, Lukashenko authorized anti-Russian protests and detained bloggers and journalists, including employees of Russian media outlets, for allegedly insulting the Belarusian nation.<sup>27</sup> In 2018, the government commemorated the hundredth anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic's declaration of independence from Russia.<sup>28</sup> As the August 2020 presidential elections approached, Lukashenko publicly blamed Russia, rather than his usual suspects in the West, for fomenting discontent, even arresting a group of Russian mercenaries that he claimed were sent by Moscow to provoke unrest.<sup>29</sup> Lukashenko's violent crackdown on street protests after the election effectively ended the *détente* with the West. With the demonstrations growing, Lukashenko pivoted back to Moscow for support. Moscow remains lukewarm toward Lukashenko and appears eager to make sure Belarus does not reorient its foreign and security policy away from Moscow, should a political transition occur.

## Armenia—Straddling the East-West Divide

Unlike in Ukraine, the government of Armenia's decision to back away from the EU and join the EAEU did not immediately provoke large-scale protests. Constantly on the brink of war with Azerbaijan (which is allied with Armenia's historical enemy, Turkey), the country has little choice but to maintain strong ties with Russia, its traditional, but not always reliable, ally and protector.

While this broadly shared realization among Armenians helped cushion the government from large-scale protests after it walked away from the deal with the EU, the damage to the reputation of the country's leadership among the general public was done. Two years later, public attitudes turned against Russia as Russian goods flooded Armenia, increasing competition for local producers. Negative attitudes were further fueled by the murder of an Armenian family by a Russian soldier in 2015 near the Russian base in Gyumri. The incident contributed to growing doubts in Armenia about the benefits of the Russian military presence there.

Russian arms sales to Azerbaijan are a constant source of disagreement between Russia and Armenia. Many Armenians blame their country's territorial losses in the Four-Day War with Azerbaijan in 2016 on Russian arms sales to the latter. Against this backdrop, in 2017, then president Serzh Sargsyan quietly reengaged with the EU, with which Armenia signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, a somewhat diluted version of the Association Agreement rejected four years earlier.

The 2018 Velvet Revolution was driven largely by domestic factors, but the outsized presence of Russia in Armenia's economy also played a role. For years prior to the revolution, the country had experienced protests against high prices consumers had to pay for gas and electricity from Russian-owned utilities. These helped lay the groundwork for the ouster of Sargsyan and Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan, a former Gazprom executive with close ties to Moscow.

However, the revolution has not resolved the complicated relationship with Russia or its role in Armenia's energy supply. In April, protesters once again took to the streets to demonstrate against the high prices that Russian-owned utilities charge. Disputes over oil and gas prices continue. The latest disagreement was triggered by Russian demands that Armenia buy gas at the pre-pandemic prices offered to EAEU members, which are significantly higher than the market price after the pandemic caused global energy prices to plummet. Armenia—along with Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, which are in a similar situation—has put the dispute on the EAEU agenda. To reduce Russian leverage, it has been trying to diversify its energy supply, seeking to attract Chinese companies into the sector as well as reaching out to Iran and Georgia.

## The Chinese Are Coming

The increased Chinese presence across former Soviet states underscores the limited nature of Russia's appeal to these as an economic partner. As is the case in many other parts of the world, their economic and geopolitical dynamics have been affected significantly by the emergence of China as a major trade, investment, and diplomatic actor. China's expanding economic footprint in Eurasia has forced Russia to be increasingly mindful of Beijing's equities, particularly given its own growing dependence on the country.

China's economic presence is most visible in Central Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as in other investments in infrastructure, energy, and mining. As Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate, it is now an essential trade and investment partner for Central Asia.<sup>30</sup>

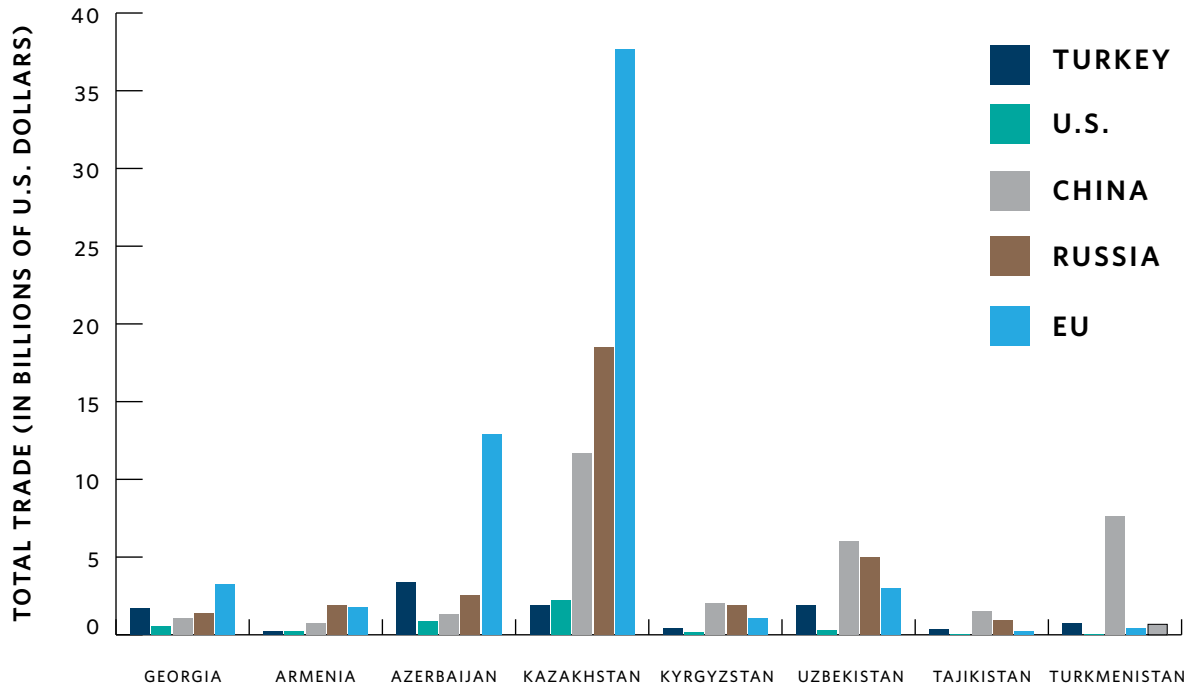
With at least \$8 billion in loans, China is Turkmenistan's largest creditor.<sup>31</sup> Ninety-four percent of the country's gas, its primary export, goes to China. Ironically enough, gas sales to Russia now represent a diversification strategy for Ashgabat.<sup>32</sup> China holds roughly 50 percent of Tajikistan's \$2.8 billion foreign debt.<sup>33</sup> It is telling that Kyrgyzstan turned first to Beijing, not Moscow, for debt relief as the coronavirus pandemic devastated its economy. The Export-Import Bank of China holds \$1.7 billion of the country's \$4 billion foreign debt.<sup>34</sup>

China's clout is growing in the South Caucasus too. Armenia and Georgia see their relationships with it as a key partnership and an opportunity to expand the geographic and geopolitical range of their foreign policies.<sup>35</sup> The EU and Russia remain Armenia's main partners, but trade with China has climbed steadily, surpassing \$770 million in 2018.<sup>36</sup> China is now its second-largest trading partner overall.<sup>37</sup>

For Georgia, China's economic clout raises the potential costs to Russia should it launch another large-scale military intervention. Beijing has repeatedly reiterated its support for the country's territorial integrity and takes a dim view of Russian-backed separatism in Eurasia.<sup>38</sup> To be sure, China is not likely to become an advocate for Tbilisi in its long-running quest to regain control of its Russian-occupied separatist territories. At the same time, the geostrategic importance of Chinese investment flows into finance, infrastructure, tourism, and industrial parks, such as the Hualing Special Economic Zone, can hardly be lost on Moscow.<sup>39</sup>

FIGURE 2

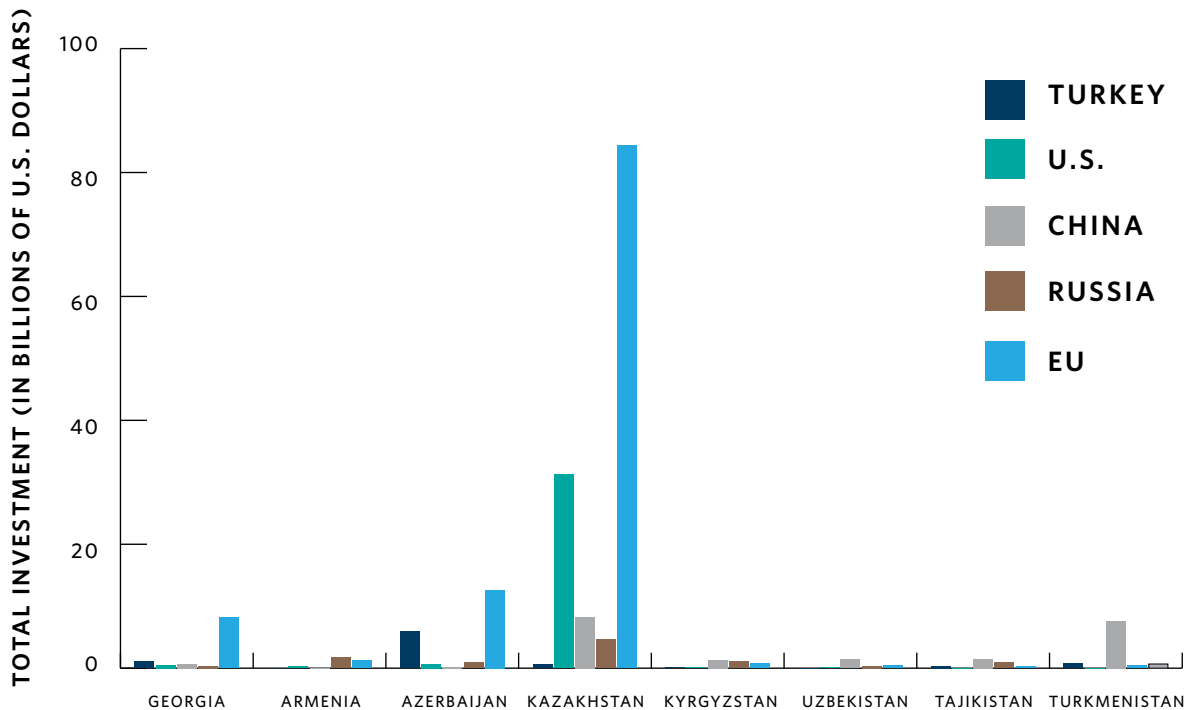
**Eurasian Countries' Trade Turnover With Key Partners in 2018**



SOURCE: World Bank, Observatory of Economic Complexity

FIGURE 3

**Foreign Direct Investment Into Eurasian Countries by Key Partners in 2018**



SOURCE: International Monetary Fund



The emergence of China as a major actor in the post-Soviet economic and geopolitical space is undoubtedly a complicating factor for Russia. This dilutes Moscow's influence in the region, limits its freedom of action, offers an unfavorable comparison of what a major economic power can offer its partners, and expands Russia's neighbors' options for geopolitical maneuvering. When presented with no choice in the matter by Beijing, Moscow has no alternative but to accept it. Crucially, it creates for China tangible long-term stakes in regional stability as well as in the territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty of Russia's neighbors.

### Eurasia's Open-Door Policy

China is not the only actor increasingly present in Eurasia and offering alternatives to Russian influence.

After the Soviet collapse, South Korea took an early interest in the large ethnic Korean diaspora in Central Asia, which is the result of the Stalin-era, mass deportation from the Russian Far East.<sup>40</sup> That population has been an important link with South Korea, which now serves as a destination for Korean-speaking Central Asian labor migrants.<sup>41</sup> Korean Airlines operates its transcontinental Eurasia cargo hub in Uzbekistan, while Seoul and Tashkent signed approximately \$12 billion in investment deals in 2019.<sup>42</sup>

South Korea is also an important investment, trade, and diplomatic partner for Kazakhstan. In 2019, trade turnover between the two countries reached \$6.5 billion, according to Kazakhstani news reports.<sup>43</sup> Given the nuclear tensions on the Korean Peninsula, Kazakhstani officials cultivate ties with South Korea to underscore their country's record as a leader in the global nonproliferation movement.<sup>44</sup>

South Korea has ties to Turkmenistan with presidential visits in 2014 and 2019, focusing on the energy, infrastructure, and technology sectors.<sup>45</sup> The Export-Import Bank of Korea, along with the Japan Bank for International Cooperation, financed a \$2.4 billion petrochemical factory in the country that opened in 2018.<sup>46</sup>

Japan signed a \$6 billion trade and investment deal with Uzbekistan in late 2019.<sup>47</sup> Its trade turnover with Kazakhstan reached \$2 billion in 2018.<sup>48</sup> In 2015, it agreed to provide \$18 billion in infrastruc-

ture funding to Turkmenistan, \$99 million to support highway construction in Kyrgyzstan, and \$7.5 million to Tajikistan for border security, water management, and agricultural upgrades.<sup>49</sup>

Japanese universities host many young Central Asians, many of whom on competitive Japanese government scholarships and programs.<sup>50</sup> Singaporean universities are likewise popular in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan, where the country's leadership claims it looks to Singapore as a possible development model and funds scholarships for Kazakhs to study at the city-state's top institutions.<sup>51</sup>

India, too, has entered the Eurasian geopolitical sweepstakes. Its engagement focuses largely on security issues in Afghanistan and on countering Pakistan as well as China. India has signed defense and security cooperation agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, and it recently has stepped up counterterrorism cooperation with Uzbekistan.<sup>52</sup>

Turkey, which has close ties to Azerbaijan and a tortured history with Armenia, backs Baku in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and has been active in Eurasia, building on its ethnic and cultural legacy there and expanding trade and economic relations.<sup>53</sup> It is among the top trading and investment partners for Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova.<sup>54</sup> While its economic footprint is smaller in Central Asia, it remains one of the main transportation links for the region and a destination for its migrant labor. In 2019, Uzbekistan joined the Turkic Council, an Ankara-sponsored regional multilateral organization for Turkic-speaking countries.<sup>55</sup>

The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have become key investment partners to several Eurasian states. The former's sovereign wealth fund has pledged over \$10 billion in investments to Uzbekistan. Dubai Port World manages Kazakhstani logistics hubs on the Caspian and the Khorgos dry port, a key BRI hub.<sup>56</sup> The investment activities of the Gulf states are less visible in the South Caucasus, but they have a growing footprint in the real estate and tourism sectors across all three countries there.<sup>57</sup>

In short, the opening of Eurasia to the world is a fact of life and Russia has plenty of competition in its quest for influence in its former empire.

## Changing Societies

Demographic change in Eurasia is another limiting factor on Russian ambitions. The post-Soviet generation does not look to Moscow as an attractive cultural, economic, or geopolitical center of gravity.<sup>58</sup> Russia is no longer seen in these countries as the big fraternal nation it was during the Soviet era.

Central Asia has experienced significant population growth since 1991, increasing by 50 percent to almost 75 million. The median age in Central Asia is twenty-seven. In Azerbaijan, where the population increased from 7 million to over 10 million since independence, the median age is thirty-two. A new generation has reached adulthood after having been born, raised, and educated in the post-Soviet era. It has had far less contact with Russia than the previous generation.

People in the region are looking beyond Moscow. In a 2019 poll in Armenia, over 60 percent of respondents (whose median age is thirty-six) said they had positive views of the EU, placing it far ahead of the EAEU as the most trusted international institution.<sup>59</sup> That same survey showed that 65 percent of respondents in Moldova—where more than a quarter of the population earns its living as migrant laborers in Russia or in the EU—said they trusted the EU, compared to 35 percent for the EAEU.<sup>60</sup>

Even in Belarus, trust in the EU is slightly higher (3 percent) than for the EAEU. Furthermore, recent polling also indicated that only 8 percent of respondents say they favor full unification with Russia, with 36 percent approving of some sort of shared political institutions.<sup>61</sup> That leaves roughly half of the country wanting Belarus to remain independent of Russia.

As Figures 4 and 5 indicate, ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking populations have declined across Eurasia. This is in large part due to emigration of ethnic Russians, who have long been a key lever of Russian influence.<sup>62</sup> Russia's weight in demographic and cultural terms is becoming less prevalent in these countries, and Russian-language skills are atrophying, particularly outside of urban areas. Vyacheslav Nikonov, the chair of the Committee on Education and Science of Russia's parliament, lamented this trend when he claimed in 2015 there were 50 million fewer Russian speakers in the world than in 1991.<sup>63</sup> He attributed the decline to the passage of time with the Soviet-trained generation moving into retirement age and a de-emphasizing of the Russian language in schools across the former Soviet space.

FIGURE 4  
**Ethnic Russians in Central Asia**

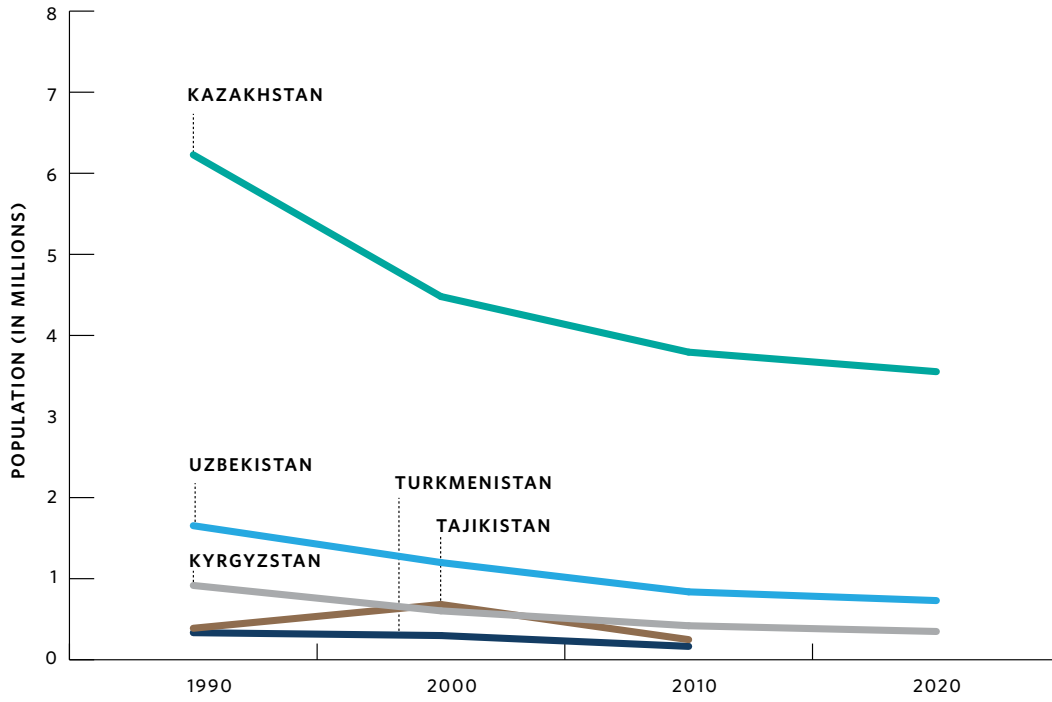
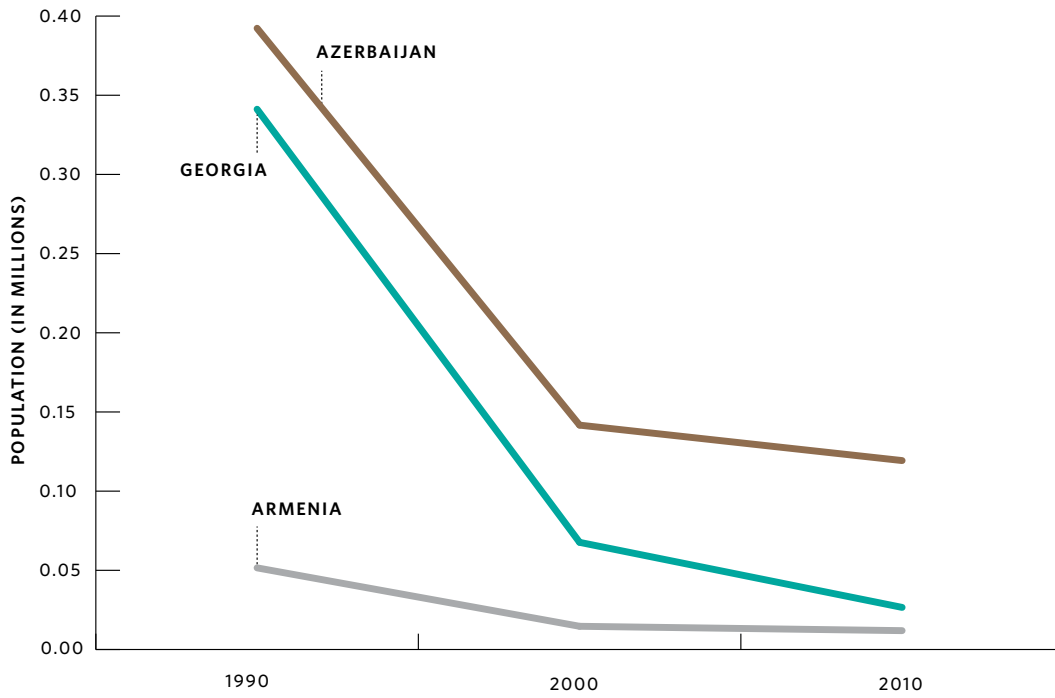


FIGURE 5  
**Ethnic Russians in the South Caucasus**



**SOURCE:** Census data and official estimates

The politics of language remains a sensitive issue across Eurasia, particularly as nationalist tendencies grow. Russia objected to the 2020 decision by the government of Uzbekistan to enforce the use of Uzbek, rather than Russian, in the country's civil service.<sup>64</sup> Responding to nationalists' demands for greater use of Kazakh in public life, Kazakhstan's government decided to switch the language from the Cyrillic alphabet to Latin script by 2025—a move that sparked outrage in Moscow as an attack on Russian culture.<sup>65</sup> Armenia's government has rejected appeals from Russia's Duma to recognize Russian as an official language of the country, with the education minister reiterating in 2017 that the “only official language in Armenia is and will remain the Armenian language, since we are an independent, sovereign state.”<sup>66</sup>

In Kazakhstan, members of the generation who studied in Western institutions on prestigious government scholarships have entered prominent positions in government and public life.<sup>67</sup> A younger generation is also coming of age in Azerbaijan, where, in 2019, Duke University alumnus Samir Nuriyev replaced hardline anti-U.S. Ramiz Mehdiyev as head of the Presidential Administration.<sup>68</sup> The country's new economics minister was educated in California, while several other young technocrats hold influential positions.<sup>69</sup>

Eurasian citizens have grown unhappy with their countries' low standards of living, poor social services, and high rates of corruption. Meanwhile, life as a migrant worker in Russia is hardly a ticket to a more comfortable life or a way out of poverty. Migrants there often face racism and exploitation.<sup>70</sup> Nor does the presence of large populations of Eurasian migrants foster much goodwill toward Moscow. As borders were closed due to the pandemic and economic opportunities dried up in Russia earlier this year, many migrants found themselves unemployed and struggled to make it home, often spending days at Russian airports or stranded at border checkpoints. Many experienced abuse by Russian officials in cramped and squalid conditions.<sup>71</sup> Russia has promised assistance to its cash-strapped neighbors to help them through the pandemic, but that aid has been slow in coming. Others—China, international financial institutions, the EU, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates—have stepped in to fill the void.<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Fears of Russia's neo-imperialism have become a dominant theme in assessments of the security environment in Eurasia. Yet the countries along Russia's periphery are changing in a remarkable and often underappreciated fashion. As the post-Soviet generation matures, societies across the region are becoming more nationalistic, more connected to the outside world, less exposed to Russia, and

increasingly frustrated with the state of affairs in their respective countries.<sup>73</sup> Russia's own diminished circumstances, limited financial resources, and ham-fisted policies have severely undercut its ability to regather its former colonies within a sphere of influence.

In its pursuit of regional integration, Russia has to compete with China, whose deep pockets it cannot match, and the EU, which remains an attractive partner to many Eurasian states, not only as an alternative to Russia and China but also as a model of economic development and source of assistance.

Still, Eurasia's security is fragile. Russia is a difficult and threatening neighbor, and its wars with Ukraine and Georgia have left a deep imprint on the region's geopolitics. However, focusing on Eurasia only through the prism of Russia's reintegration efforts risks overestimating its capabilities and underestimating its neighbors as individual actors with agency, dynamic societies, and long histories of managing Moscow.

Preoccupation with Russia also runs the risk of missing other potential sources of instability. The July 2020 fighting on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border highlights how frozen conflicts, territorial disputes, and ethnic tensions—which are present from Eastern Europe to Central Asia, and which Russia has neither the inclination nor the ability to resolve—can flare up at any moment.

The coronavirus pandemic has also laid bare long-standing problems of poor governance, entrenched corruption, unsustainable economic models, and underfunded social welfare systems in Eurasia. Georgia seems to have had relative success in slowing down the pandemic, but most countries, including Russia, have not. Several—including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Kazakhstan—have experienced protests caused by inadequate responses to the health and economic crises. As discontent grows, it poses new legitimacy and social stability challenges for Eurasia's autocracies and struggling democracies alike.

The United States, Europe, Russia, and China have a shared interest in maintaining stability in Eurasia and in preventing conflict or state collapse there. However, the diversity of the region means that one-size-fits-all approaches will not work. Rather, tailored assistance to help governments and—wherever possible—civil societies improve governance and socioeconomic conditions, advance the health prospects of citizens, and improve food and water security are the best way to enhance long-term stability. A focus on building state capacity, including economic and infrastructure development, and on countering threats such as terrorism, proliferation, infectious diseases, and drug trafficking, are all areas where the United States can shore up local vulnerabilities, often in partnership with others.

Surrounded by much larger and more powerful neighbors, the states of Eurasia have to navigate carefully around the sensitivities and sensibilities of these. The smaller and more vulnerable ones can ill afford to antagonize Russia or China by joining U.S.-championed causes. The ill-advised attempts to enlist countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the current U.S. administration's pressure campaign versus Beijing is a particularly vivid case in point.<sup>74</sup>

By virtue of geography, the United States will never have the same level of strategic interests in Eurasia that China, Russia, and the EU possess. Therefore, it should consider a version of offshore balancing, using its political, economic, and—as needed—security tool kit to selectively act as a partner to Eurasian states and help offset the geopolitical weight of their larger neighbors. U.S. allies and partners from Asia, Europe, and the Middle East can also play a key role in helping regional states balance against Russian or Chinese assertiveness.

This is not a call for the United States to disengage from Eurasia, but for a realistic approach that takes into account the role of the region's other partners, as well as the willingness and capacities of Eurasian states to partner with Washington. Central Asia is unlikely to reemerge as a priority region for Western engagement as the United States draws down its military presence in Afghanistan, but Washington and its allies should sustain their engagement in its affairs, particularly with its economic powerhouse, Kazakhstan, and its most populous state, Uzbekistan. Both countries demonstrate willingness to partner with the West, and both countries can play important roles in regional stability.

The United States has more interests and more influence in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine should remain priorities in order to help them advance political and economic reforms, and to improve their defensive and deterrent capabilities, including against hybrid tactics. Armenia's new democratic government too needs assistance to realize its political and economic reform agenda. Yet, providing this help should be done without any expectations that Yerevan will risk jeopardizing its relationship with Moscow. Given the unresolved war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, engagement with both countries will enhance the ability of the West to help manage that conflict.

Engaging Azerbaijan will be harder given its authoritarian track record and history of lukewarm relations with the West, although it has shown interest recently in engaging with the EU and the United States. Black-and-white, all-or-nothing policy frameworks that force countries to choose between ties to Moscow and the West are hardly a productive path forward.

It appears that Belarus has begun a transition away from the Lukashenko era, even though the regime is not (yet) on its last legs. The country has been misgoverned for years, and the Belarusian people clearly have voiced a desire for accountability from their leaders, although they do not necessarily want a geopolitical reorientation. There are no easy fixes for its political, social, and economic problems. The West should emphasize the need to avoid further violence while also engaging with civil society and reformist figures both inside and outside the country.

Eurasia faces enormous challenges and any positive change will likely come through incremental rather than revolutionary means. Given competing demands on U.S. resources and the growing need to focus on issues closer to home, the United States should reiterate its long-term support for such gradual change across the region, as opposed to sweeping transformational agendas that are hard to realize and often unnerve multiple stakeholders.

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