

# Geopolitics of a Divided Europe

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Europe is again a divided continent. When it comes to governance, political economy, or values, two contrasting poles have emerged: one Western, liberal, and democratic, another Eastern, statist, and autocratic. The dividing line between them has become ever sharper, threatening to separate Europe into two distinct worlds. This new divide in Europe arises from a clash between two geopolitical concepts for the continent: One is the Western project of a “Europe whole and free,” an enlarging zone of economic cooperation, political interdependency, and democratic values. The other is the Russian project of a “Eurasian Union” to rival the European Union. This article shows how these two sides of Europe have grown further apart in their conceptions of the European space, their values, governance, and economic models. It explores the reasons for the belated Western responses to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s program to divide Europe. The Russo-Georgian war was a turning point, but the West took a long time to recognize the full implications of Putin’s policy. The current confrontation between Russia and the West is not exactly like the Cold War. Russia’s position is weaker. And the battle will be fought out primarily with economic instruments. However, it is clear that this conflict places Central and Eastern Europe back on the front lines of a divided Europe, raising a number of demons from the past.

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Europe is again a divided continent. When it comes to governance, political economy, or values, two contrasting poles have emerged: one Western, liberal, and democratic; another Eastern, statist, and autocratic. The dividing line between them has become ever sharper, threatening to separate Europe into two distinct worlds. After 1989, a number of countries moved from one pole to another. Freed from Soviet influence, they rapidly integrated into the West. Other countries remain caught in between. Russia’s post-Olympic invasion of Crimea in 2014 and ultimatum to Ukraine not to join the European Union or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) seem intended to sharpen this divide further and retain parts of Ukraine on the Eastern side. Other European countries, such as Moldova, await their moment of reckoning.

This new divide in Europe arises from a clash between two geopolitical concepts for the continent: One is the Western project of a “Europe whole and free,” an enlarging zone of economic cooperation, political interdependency, and democratic values.<sup>1</sup> The other is the Russian project of a “Eurasian Union” to rival the European Union.<sup>2</sup> These geopolitical projects differ on multiple dimensions: their conception of the European space, its governance, values, and economics.

## Dividing the European Space

A fundamental issue in Europe is whether the Eastern boundary of the European Union can ever be definitively resolved. Timothy Garton Ash took it up in a remarkable 2001 article in the *New York Review of Books*.<sup>3</sup> Writing before the European enlargement that added eight new Central and East European member states in 2004, he argued that the issue facing Europe was not whether it would be a Europe of fifteen or twenty-seven states but whether it would be a Europe of forty-one or forty-two states and would Moldova be among them? This has proved to be a prescient point in a Europe whose geographic boundaries are ill-defined and oft-contested. Turkey has long been an applicant for membership in the European Union. Its justification for its membership application is, in part, geographical, thanks to its ownership of a small piece of territory that is indisputably European—on the Western side of the Bosphorus straits. By that logic, Ukraine and Russia would also qualify for aspirant membership status. Yet, geography is not the only factor that qualifies a country as European. Former European colonies in North Africa have signed Association Agreements with the European Union, including Morocco and Tunisia.<sup>4</sup> Israel may one day seek the same. Their claims may one day be recognized since the European Union has never declared whether the designation “European” is a cultural, geographical, moral, linguistic, historical, or religious one. Europe does have extra-European territories, for instance in the Caribbean, the Falklands, and Polynesia.

At least in continental Europe and its hinterlands, the European Union has grown unchallenged, taking in Eastern European and Mediterranean countries that share a commitment to European values, most recently Croatia. Now, Russia seeks to draw a hard boundary and settle Garton Ash’s question once and for all. No Moldova in the EU, also no Ukraine, and no Belarus.

After years of insisting that it opposed NATO’s Eastern expansion, but not the European Union (EU), in 2012, Russia began to publicly voice its opposition to EU membership for former Soviet states. In fact, Russia began a campaign to prevent EU membership for former Soviet states as early as 2009, when the European Partnership indicated an EU intent to structure the geopolitical realities in the former Soviet space.<sup>5</sup> Russia has used a variety of means to oppose this. It has built alternative geopolitical linkages with former Soviet states, most recently the Eurasian customs union.<sup>6</sup> It has used coercive tactics to undermine or prevent its neighbors from making the changes necessary to join up with Europe, using threats of trade wars to prevent free trade agreements, cutting off supplies or raising prices of gas, support for anti-EU political parties, and even military threats or invasion.

While for Russia, the continued enlargement of the EU is a threat, Europe sees Russia’s use of force to hive off parts of neighboring countries and prevent its

neighbors from joining the peaceful EU as a threat to the Western order.<sup>7</sup> The EU is based upon the notion that the use of force in international affairs should be avoided at all costs, that most conflicts can be resolved through economic interchange and diplomacy, and that nations should be free to decide their political fates. These principles have enabled the EU to help keep the peace in Europe for nearly seventy years, and European political leaders believe that they remain relevant today. Russia and Europe, then, have sharply differing concepts of how to order the European space.

### European Values

In addition, Russia and Europe are increasingly at odds in public values and culture. Since Russia hosted the winter Olympics in 2014 and plans to host the 2018 World Cup, some of the most vivid and visible culture clashes have come about in the domain of sports. In August 2013, the Zurich-based International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) questioned the Russian Federation, the host of the 2018 World Cup, about a law it had recently passed that banned homosexual “propaganda,” essentially making it illegal in Russia to expose minors to any pro-gay speech. Even wearing a rainbow button would qualify. FIFA wrote that it would “foresee zero tolerance against discrimination based, among other, on sexual orientation.” FIFA echoed a similar appeal made by the International Olympic Committee, which was concerned about whether the law would be applied to participants and spectators of the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi. The anti-gay law in Russia—as well as questions about its application, which have been answered in contradictory manner by various Russian authorities—underscored how far Russia is out of line with European values of democracy, freedom of expression, and rule of law. Russia is not moving gradually toward Western values but determinedly away from them.<sup>8</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been hailed as the leader of a worldwide conservative values movement—against gay marriage, in favor of traditional gender roles, national identity, and Christian values. In his speech at the Valdai conference in 2013 that brings Kremlin insiders together with Western thought leaders, Putin criticized “Euro-Atlantic” countries for “rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual.”<sup>9</sup> This stance has gained support from U.S. conservative and far right groups who share a similar critique. Yet, Russia’s conservatism goes beyond what is accepted in the West—as illustrated by the imprisonment of the Pussy Riot rock band for performing unauthorized in a church—and is used as a justification for authoritarian rule.

**Figure 1**  
**A divided Europe**



Source: Freedom House, “Map of Freedom,” Freedom in the World 2013. Light (green) = free; very light (yellow) = partly free; dark (purple) = unfree.

## European Governance

The most difficult aspect of Putin’s project for Europe is in the area of governance. It is no secret that President Putin has centralized power in Russia. After the dysfunction that characterized the presidency of President Boris Yeltsin, Putin launched a program of power consolidation, wresting control from regional governors who had exercised great influence on the basis of direct elections. He imposed seven federal regions on top of the governors and created a party of power, “United Russia,” to control an unruly Duma, which has now become a rubber stamp. He promoted a network of former security officials to top positions throughout the bureaucracy, the so-called *siloviki*. He built official “civil society” organizations such as the “*Nashi*” youth movement to mobilize the population in support of his program. Under Putin, Russia became an authoritarian state, one that holds periodic rigged elections.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time that Russia has slid toward greater authoritarianism, countries seeking to join the EU have gone in the opposite direction. Freedom House democracy scores improved dramatically between 1999 and 2010 in the Western Balkans under EU tutelage, for instance in Albania, Croatia, and Serbia, while they declined steadily in Russia and aligned former Soviet Union states (Figure 1).<sup>11</sup> The EU has been one of the most effective democracy promotion organizations in the world, creating incentives for prospective new member states to adhere to community norms.<sup>12</sup> While these norms have been under attack in Hungary and elsewhere recently, and the European Union has had trouble responding to democratic backsliding by existing

member states, on the whole it has had tremendous success promoting democracy in Eastern Europe. In this way too, Russia and the EU are completely at odds.

## **European Economics**

Russia and Europe also increasingly diverge on economic policies, with the European Union representing free trade and movement of labor, capital, goods, people, and services, and Russia creating a corrupt, centrally controlled, economically nationalist, natural resource-dependent economy. President Putin's signature economic policy was reining in the oligarchs, forcing them to sell strategic media and natural resource enterprises to the state, give up any independent political ambitions, and submit to Kremlin control. These practices have had an impact on Western companies too, most notably when, after Putin came to power, Russia forced Western oil companies to cede control of some of their shares in lucrative projects to Russian enterprises. Another example of the increasing differentiation in the business environment between Russia and the West comes from the world of sports. As Russia's foreign policy toward its "near abroad" has become more aggressive, Russia has sought to force its oligarchs to repatriate capital to Russia, including Russian-owned sports teams. The Brooklyn Nets, owned by oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, under pressure to repatriate ownership, considered transferring ownership of the team to a Russian-based company. However, they seem to have dropped that after the NBA and other team owners raised objections about their ability to enforce league standards on a team based in Russia. In another sign of disdain for European free trade norms, Russia led the world in adopting protectionist trade measures in 2013. Russia's vision for the "Eurasian Union" is not of a command economy but an economy dominated by, and most likely paying tribute to, the center. The contrast with EU economies is great.

## **Putin's Project and Western Responses**

Russia has sought to erect a barrier between itself and the West and assert its difference along four dimensions: its concept of the European space and its values, governance, and economic model. In this way, Putin seems to be replaying the game plan of the Soviet Union or positioning himself as the new Metternich, champion of a regressive conservatism on the continent. This strategy seems designed to enhance the durability of his rule, strengthen the Russian state, or enable the independent development of Russian culture. From a Western perspective, this strategy looks like an exercise in futility, the resurrection of a failed approach. It seems barely credible that Russian leaders could adopt it. This helps to explain the belated and mixed response to the threat of Putin's Russia.

Despite the many signals that Russia has been pursuing an anti-Western foreign policy since 2000, the West has until now not perceived it clearly or known how to oppose it. The West continued to believe that Russia would continue on the path Gorbachev and Yeltsin charted—a course toward Western-style modernization, only with somewhat greater state control.

Yet, Putin represented a volte-face in Russia's relations with the West. He sought not only to centralize state power, but to change its policy from one of Westernization to national self-determination. He connected Russian pride to the legacy of the Soviet Union, making the tune of the old Soviet anthem the new national anthem of the Russian Federation. The European Union, for a number of years, believed that the false presidency of Dmitri Medvedev indicated a liberalizing and Westernizing trend. Likewise, the U.S. "reset" with Russia under Barack Obama was premised on the thought that Russia could be induced to share Western values. Now, both projects are dead. Western governments are finally able to see what Russia has become: a revisionist power that seeks to establish a countervailing alliance in Europe that is nationalist and authoritarian. Russia has finally been ejected from the G7 and the West has responded to the invasion of Ukraine with a ratcheting level of economic sanctions.

Yet, with the breathing room it had between 2000 and 2014, Russia has been able to exert influence from its authoritarian pole on a number of countries through international alliances of various sorts. As Europe democratized, with Serbia taking great strides and Croatia joining the European Union, Russia responded by digging in its heels in the former Soviet Union. The latest and sharpest episode in this struggle has taken place in Ukraine, which has been pressured to choose either the EU or the Eurasian Union. Russian pressure finally led to military intervention. Yet similar struggles are taking place in Moldova, Georgia, and even in Belarus. In future, they may even arise in countries that have made clear their allegiances to one camp or the other, such as Hungary, which recently purchased a Russian nuclear reactor and whose prime minister praised the Russian economic and political model.

Geopolitical conflict between Russia and the West has sharpened over time. A key turning point came in 2007–2008 in the run-up to Kosovo's independence and the Russo-Georgian war. The West underestimated the Russian response to the United Nations' Ahtisaari plan in 2007 and Kosovo's subsequent declaration of independence in February 2008. Russia made clear its displeasure with both initiatives and announced that it would retaliate by declaring independence for the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which it did after the August 2008 Russo-Georgian war. On 27 August 2008, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev wrote in the *Financial Times*, "We argued consistently that it would be impossible . . . to tell the Abkhazians and Ossetians (and dozens of other groups around the world) that what was good for the Kosovo Albanians was not good for them. In international relations, you cannot have one rule for some and another rule for others."<sup>13</sup> Those two events—the Western recognition of Kosovo independence and the Russo-Georgian war—not only created a deeper confrontation but also established the

geopolitical boundaries of a divided Europe: the Balkans to the EU, the former Soviet states to Russia.

A few countries, however, remain caught in between.<sup>14</sup> Moldova, which has experienced democratic movements and pro-European policies at times, has remained suspended in its national ambitions by the “frozen” conflict in Transnistria, and the existence of a Russian-supported breakaway republic. Georgia has struggled to overcome the legacy of the 2008 war and Russian occupation while reforming its economy. Ukraine, however, is the big prize. Russia has fought tenaciously to keep Ukraine out of the West, though Ukraine is famously divided geographically and has strong reasons to want an association agreement with the European Union. Its oligarchs and business leaders want the deeper trade relations that the Association Agreement with the EU will bring. This helps to explain why it was eventually signed in 2014 after dramatic events—months-long protests on the Maidan, the collapse of the Yanukovich government, the election of a new, pro-EU government, and a war with Russia.

Russia openly sought to prevent Ukraine from signing an Association Agreement with the EU and to join the Eurasian customs union instead. While the government of President Viktor Yanukovich continued to negotiate with the EU, his sudden decision not to sign in November 2013 after last-minute meetings in the Kremlin caused the Ukrainian opposition to cry foul. Mounting street demonstrations were supported by Western leaders, who complained of Russian interference in negotiations between the EU and a sovereign state. Ukraine was forced to choose between closer association with the EU or the Eurasian Union.

European policy, at times, has appeared to be caught in between a desire not to anger Russia and cede a sphere of influence in Europe to its erstwhile geopolitical foe—and to support continued enlargement of the EU, hoping that Russia would, in the end, drop its objections. In 2008, Germany seemed to support Russia’s claims to a sphere of influence in Europe, when it opposed U.S. efforts to offer a NATO membership prospect to both Ukraine and Georgia. In 2013, German Chancellor Angela Merkel changed tack, signaling that Ukraine should be free to make its own international agreements and alliances without Russian pressure. This shift was caused by a number of factors but primarily the hard line President Putin took in international and domestic politics and the manner in which he reasserted his hold on the Presidency, where Germany had hoped to see a transition to a more liberal power. With the demise of Medvedev’s promise of a more liberal Russia, Europe began to perceive the reality of a growing divide between Russia and the West.

### **Central Europe on the Front Line**

One unfortunate consequence of the growing confrontation between Russia and the West is that it puts Central European states on the front line again, after years of

relative peace. Presently, all eyes are on Hungary, whose super-majority right-wing government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has changed the constitution in ways that have led the EU to issue a reprimand for undemocratic behavior while reorienting Hungary's foreign policy toward Russia. Russia also reportedly has approached Baltic states to see what price they would want to leave NATO and join the Eurasian Union. These countries are likely to continue to be a hotbed of competition between Russia and the West for some time. This conflict will be played out through hydrocarbon refining, transit, and pipeline construction deals, through nuclear and other energy contracts, military threats, exercises, and bases; Central Europe will return to its well-known role as a zone of competition between East and West and a hotbed of spies.

### **What Is to Be Done, Now?**

Russia's strategy over the coming years is clear. It will try to build its declared Eurasian Union into a serious competitor of the EU and seek to thwart U.S. and EU efforts to exert influence in Europe and Eurasia. The Western strategy is somewhat less clear. It seeks to integrate Russia into Western practices, values, and organizations, such as the World Trade Organization, but must also defend itself and others, from Russian pressures. The West has yet to decide whether it will continue to address the challenge posed by Russia through a policy of engagement or return to the policy of containment that marked the Cold War.

While Russia and the West seem headed toward a replay of the Cold War,<sup>15</sup> this conflict is being played out more through more subtle means. On the one hand, Russia does not plan a massive invasion of Western Europe and the United States no longer has hundreds of thousands of troops stationed in Europe. On the other, Russia has become far more integrated into the European economy through its extensive oil and gas exports and ownership of European assets. For this reason, one of the most important venues in which this competition plays out is in energy policy. Russia has sought to use energy policy as a lever to exert political influence through shut-offs and contract renegotiations with the Baltic states, Ukraine, and Central Europe. The European Union, by contrast, seeks to force Russia to break up the Gazprom monopoly and get Russian companies to play by EU rules of the game. After years of delay, a concerted European energy policy appears to be having some effect. European countries are establishing alternative gas suppliers, investing in LNG terminals, and demanding access to the Russian internal market. In addition, shale gas investments in Central and Eastern Europe may help a number of Central and East European countries to gain energy independence and force down the price of gas. This would considerably weaken the Eastern authoritarian pole in Europe, which gains most of its revenues from trade in natural resources. It was notable that in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it concentrated primarily on those territories with considerable gas, coal



shale resources: Crimea and the Donbas, seeking to limit Ukraine's sovereignty by eliminating its energy independence.

In conclusion, we are entering a new era of European geopolitics. Today's Europe is divided again. The lines being drawn across Europe are different from those during the Cold War, as are the actors, the means, and the scale of competition. Russia has less territory than did the Soviet Union. It does not have the benefit of an ideology with worldwide adherents, nor the illusion that its economic system is more powerful. Russia's military is a shadow of what it once was. Russia today is a regional power seeking to regain past glory. Many of its former satellites have changed allegiances to the West. Ukraine seems to be on the same path. Huge armies no longer face off in Europe, ready to replay the Second World War. Military conflicts are small and contained, often fought by Russian proxies. At the same time, the United States has withdrawn its military from Europe, and European countries continue to underfund their militaries. Germany has emerged as the preeminent country in Europe, yet it will not militarize because of the burden of its past. The European Union continues to struggle with building the capacity to conduct its own foreign and security policy. At the same time, Russia itself is far more economically integrated with the West, and nearly a dozen Central and Eastern European countries are members of the European Union.

All of this leaves Central and Eastern Europe on the front lines of a complex struggle between East and West that will be played out economically, militarily, and through control of information. Just when the region was settling into a boring normality, great power politics have again shaken the small nations of Europe's borderlands, awakening its demons from their shallow graves.

## Notes

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