

RUSSIA AND ITS NEAR ABROAD

In the Framework of the Study Group “New Paradigms for Europe and its Neighbors”

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UKRAINE CRISIS SETTLES IN A DEADLOCK – FOR NOW

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Over the last ten years, Russian foreign policy has been animated by defensiveness and suspicion. Russia even has uneasy relations with the congenitally non-threatening European Union. It is touchy about the independence of the near-abroad countries, especially those politically or geographically close to the West – Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. More than a decade after the fact, the Kremlin still decries NATO's eastward enlargement as a security threat.

The reality, as the West sees it, is that NATO is as much of an offensive threat to Russia as Switzerland is. But as far as Russia is concerned it is not NATO's military power that Vladimir Putin's Kremlin finds alarming; the real threat is the alliance's potential to “swallow” Moldova or Ukraine at some point. Creating a precedent for these countries to turn towards Europe rather than to keep them within Russia's sphere of influence, Putin sees as the West's intolerable invasion of post-Soviet space.

As in Soviet times, the main task of today's ruling elite – Putin and his associates, many of them former KGB – is to preserve their tight-knit political and economic regime, now more than ever built for their personal control. Russian foreign policy continues to be an extension of official domestic priorities, and until the country's internal political situation changes, relations with the West will remain unchanged and ambiguous.

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