Russia and the Democracy Rollback in Europe

by Nicolas Bouchet

Introduction
Over the last 25 years, the EU and United States have tried to support the democratization of the post-communist and post-Soviet states of Europe with varying degrees of success. Though their consistency and impact — especially in the post-Soviet countries — is debatable, and even if it is not their top foreign policy priority in the region today, more democratic regimes remains one of their goals.

A concern with democratization is engrained in U.S. foreign policy while building a ring of democratic friends remains an objective of the EU’s Neighbourhood Policy so far. Both view democracy abroad as connected to peace, stability, and economic development. This has only been reinforced by the crisis in Ukraine and the deterioration of relations with Russia. Since democracy promotion remains a transatlantic objective, a better understanding of why it often has not been successful requires placing the issue fully within the geopolitics of the region. It is also impossible without a more systematic understanding of Russia’s role in this regard.

Russia takes deliberate actions not just against democracy promotion and democratization in its neighborhood, but also to promote undemocratic norms there. It does so both to ensure the survival of its own regime and to support its geopolitical goals. In doing so, Russia has a quasi-ideology that is undemocratic, an emerging strategy, and a growing set of tools and channels it uses. This has important policy implications for U.S. and EU democracy promotion.

The growth of U.S. and EU democracy promotion policies was inseparable from the geopolitical context of the immediate post-Cold War years. The growing difficulties encountered over the last decade are equally inseparable from the transition to a new context in which major authoritarian states like Russia gained in power.

Russia does not just counter democratization; it also prevents democratization, and sometimes promotes undemocratic norms to undermine progress where it has been made. Today, therefore, the EU and the United States are in direct competition with Russia to shape the political development of several European states.

Russia’s actions against democracy promotion form a three-part process of containment and rollback. The aim
has been to give Russia's increasingly autocratic regime layers of protection — at home, in the post-Soviet states, and in at least some post-communist states — from outside actions or influences that would help make democratic political change in the country possible.

This is not an alternative explanation to security or strategic reasons for Russia's behavior: regime competition with the United States and EU is inseparable from its pursuit of geopolitical goals in its neighborhood. The two motivations reinforce each other.

Using terms such as “containment” and “rollback” is not to say there is a new Cold War. But there is competition between the West and Russia over political norms, and these terms help to understand Russia's actions and to think of the response. The debate over whether there is a new Cold War is simultaneously misleading and relevant in this context. It is misleading if it gets stuck in arguments about Russia having an ideology, and a strategy and tools to export it, in exactly the same the way as the Soviet Union had. The debate is relevant, however, if it helps to think systematically about the geopolitical dimension of why and how Russia contains and rolls back democracy promotion — and promotes undemocratic norms abroad.

**Democratization Trends**

The post-communist countries (in Central Europe and the Balkans) and the post-Soviet ones (in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia) have had very different democratization trajectories since the end of the Cold War. While the former mostly made rapid and sustained progress, most of the latter have stagnated at low or non-existent levels or regressed after initial progress. Figure 1 shows their respective evolutions in a Freedom House index of civil and political rights to illustrate this.

Collectively, the Central European and Balkan countries started the period not far above the median Freedom House score. From the 1990s to the mid-2000s, they gradually closed the gap with Western Europe to achieve a high score. Their performance has essentially been stable at this level since, though maybe with a slight deterioration from 2004-05.
The Soviet Union’s constituent republics made democratization progress in the late 1980s. At the USSR’s dissolution, they collectively had a score slightly below the Freedom House median. This fell somewhat over the next couple of years, and since then there has been further small and gradual decline. The same trend is observed at a lower score if the Baltic states are excluded.

The post-Soviet collective score masks big variations. The Baltic states performed like the post-communist ones. (Reference below to the post-Soviet states therefore excludes them, given this and their other specificities.) Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine performed somewhat above the median score while Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia performed under it. Finally Belarus, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan scored consistently extremely low.

Having started the period with a score as high as that of the post-communist group, Russia saw its performance deteriorate sharply in second half of 1990s. Since 2000, it has scored even lower than the post-Soviet average. Between 1991 and 1997, no post-Soviet state scored higher than Russia. Between 1998 and 2003, it fell behind Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Since 2004, only Belarus, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and lately Kazakhstan have scored worse. It is important to note Russia’s own record relative to the other former Soviet states when considering its role in their respective democratization performance.

**External Influence or Autocracy Promotion?**

The democratization of the post-communist states and the lack of progress or the reversals in the post-Soviet ones have been strongly affected by external factors, through a combination of passive diffusion and demonstration effects, deliberate learning from and copying external actors in these countries, and deliberate actions by foreign and transnational actors. The evolution of the post-communist states took place within the Western geopolitical and democratic environment, which made them much more likely to be open to diffusion and learning. The crucial external factor, though, was conditionality for joining the EU (and to a lesser extent for joining NATO).

By contrast, the evolution of the post-Soviet states took place within the Russian geopolitical and autocratic environment. For the Central Asian states, this was compounded by China’s proximity. Those states in the Caucasus and to the west of Russia were exposed, at least to some degree, to the Western environment, though not to the same extent as to Russia’s influence. There was, furthermore, no EU or NATO conditionality perspective for the post-Soviet states, except very tentatively for a couple of them in recent years.

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Variations in Western leverage and linkages help explain variations in democracy diffusion and learning/copying between post-communist and post-Soviet states. Variations in transnational links also helped determine the success or failure of electoral (color) revolutions in both groups. The geographical, historical, economic, and cultural dimensions of link in the post-Soviet states also favor Russian over Western influence. Russia itself has been immune to Western leverage and had limited linkages.

Transatlantic democracy promotion has varied considerably between the two sets of countries and among both of them. It was mostly successful in the post-communist states, but has been limited, inconsistent, and ineffective in the post-Soviet ones. For the latter, the United States focused on Russia in the 1990s and only came later to pay limited attention to the others. EU efforts in the post-Soviet countries came as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy and then the Eastern Partnership, but with

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limited serious commitment, conditionality, and aid. In Russia, U.S. democracy promotion was marginal, while the EU’s approach has been superficial and unsystematic.

It is not surprising, therefore, that these efforts have had little impact on democratization in the post-Soviet states. Autocratic dynamics inside these countries have proved too strong to be affected by weak and inconsistent democracy promotion. This has been compounded by a geopolitical environment that has increasingly enabled autocratic regimes to push back against democracy promotion and outside pressure.

Over the last 10 years, the international context has made democracy aid more difficult, and the space for international support to democracy actors has shrunk. Re-emerging as a regional power, Russia has reduced whatever leverage the United States and EU may have had in the post-Soviet states by providing rulers with alternative sources of economic, military and diplomatic support.

The question of whether there is also such a thing as autocracy promotion is now being asked. A regime’s resistance to democracy promotion or its prevention of democratization at home does not automatically mean willingness to promote autocracy abroad. Nevertheless there is growing scrutiny of the intent of autocratic powers like Russia with regard to democratization in their regions, and how this relates to their geopolitical interests.

Russia’s Behavior
Russia has had a negative impact on democratization in the post-Soviet space through the example of its growing authoritarianism, and also as a side-effect of its pursuit of security and economic goals. But it has also taken deliberate actions against democracy promotion and democratization in these countries. Together, they form a three-part process of containment and rollback at home, in the post-Soviet states and at least in some post-communist countries.

Russia has gone from being an object of democracy promotion to its leading opponent. In the 1990s, it was open to democracy promotion, not least because this mostly supported President Boris Yeltsin and thus did not challenge the regime. As relations with the United States became more difficult, it still remained relatively open. Russia became less democratic from the late 1990s, at the same time as electoral revolutions — ousting authoritarians by civil society protests with some foreign help — spread from the post-communist to the post-Soviet states. By the mid-2000s, the backlash against democracy promotion

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13 Bunce and Wolchik, Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries.
was clearly underway in Russia and spreading to its neighbors.  

To contain democracy promotion at home, the Russian regime adopted an insulation strategy, which has led to what is now labeled the “closing space.” Critical civil society has been curtailed legally and harassed administratively and physically, while independent media have been severely curbed. Pro-regime groups and pseudo-NGOs have been created and funded through grants to undermine independent ones. The systematic cutting off of civil society from outside support keeps increasing steadily. Foreign democracy NGOs have been harassed and development agencies have had to back off democracy-related activities or — like USAID — been made to leave entirely. International election monitoring and assistance for political party development have also been attacked.

Russia has helped expand closing space in order to contain democracy promotion in the post-Soviet states too. The promotion of the principles of unqualified sovereignty and non-interference, the passing of identical NGO laws, and the growing challenge to election monitoring show how Russia’s example and actions have helped authoritarian elites develop strategies to keep power. It has also pushed greater bilateral and multilateral coordination and mutual support among itself and like-minded regimes. Russia has also taken a more direct approach to countering democracy promotion and undermining democratization by giving economic, military, and diplomatic support to various post-Soviet autocrats. It has also encouraged and given assistance directly and indirectly to non-democratic parties and NGOs, and enhanced the repression capabilities of rulers.

Post-Soviet states undergoing some democratization, notably Ukraine and Georgia, have seen their politics destabilized through economic, military, and diplomatic pressure. Russia has also used a wide range of channels — such as diaspora cultural and language groups, genuine and pseudo civil society organizations, the Orthodox Church, formal and informal business networks, and the Russian media — to influence the political evolution of the post-Soviet states. There are also signs of similar Russian actions through these influence channels in the Balkan EU candidate countries where democracy promotion is still on the Western agenda, and in some post-communist EU members that can be described as being “post-democracy promotion.”

Russia’s intention in these countries may not be the promotion of its model as much as in the post-Soviet states, but more about opportunistically undermining Western unity and liberal democratic values wherever it happens to have leverage and linkages. One can even ask whether the aim here with regard to protecting the Russian regime is to try to redirect EU and U.S. attention back closer to home and away from the countries that matter most to Russia.

Drivers of Russian Actions
Some argue that, even if they have an impact on democratization, Russia’s actions are the straightforward pursuit

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15 Ambrosio, Authoritarian Backlash; Carothers and Brechenmacher, Closing Space.
16 This is well-documented in, for example, Ambrosio, Authoritarian Backlash; Tolstrup, Russia vs the EU and Vanderhill, Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad, from which this section draws.
17 See the papers from the Chatham House project on “The Means and Ends of Russia’s Influence Abroad,” http://www.chathamhouse.org/about/structure/russia-eurasia-programme/means-and-ends-russias-influence-abroad-project.
of security and economic interests without any values agenda. Thus, Russia counters democracy promotion for strategic reasons and to rebuild a sphere of influence, not to promote a particular political model.  
Protecting and promoting Russia’s political norms in its sphere, however, is seen by its authoritarian regime as essential to survival. Countering and rolling back democracy promotion at home is about eliminating foreign influences and consolidating its position. Doing the same in the post-Soviet states is about preserving Russia’s sphere of influence and simultaneously further insulating the regime.

Russia’s attitude toward its neighbors’ political dispensation has long been intricately tied to its national identity and great-power ambition. The blurring of the domestic and foreign spheres, as well as the creation and use of client societies and states along the country’s periphery date from Tsarist times and continued under the Soviet Union. Even during the Yeltsin years, a time of acute Russian weakness and better relations with the West, aspiration to a sphere of influence and “civilizational” thinking endured, especially toward the “near abroad.” Russia’s opposition to democracy promotion and democratization is, therefore, interwoven with rolling back the spread of Western geopolitical influence. For its rulers, the “hard power” manifestation of that gradual expansion into Russia’s traditional space — the Kosovo war, NATO enlargement in Central Europe, the Baltic states, and potentially Ukraine and Georgia — has been paralleled by a “soft power” manifestation through electoral revolutions from countries like Serbia to Russia’s neighbors.

Although some foreign organizations exaggerated their role in them, the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine were not entirely homegrown. With their elements of democracy promotion, for Russia’s rulers they combined regime-survival fears (by setting an example for toppling leaders) and geopolitical fears (by installing leaders seeking alignment with the West). This was reinforced by the protests surrounding Russia’s parliamentary and presidential elections of 2011—12, which received a small degree of vocal support from the United States and the EU. Paradoxically, though, after the color revolutions, there was no immediate contagion to Russia; its most significant protests since the 1990s came after the democracy promotion backlash.

Since Putin returned to the presidency, the link in Russian foreign policy between regime and geopolitical interests has become more explicit, and was further driven by Ukraine’s Euromaidan. As shown in Ukraine and across the region, for Russia, eliminating outside influences in domestic politics and encouraging state-centered nationalism are now tied more openly to seeking regional hegemony through integration schemes such as the Eurasian Economic Union.

Russia being interested above all in pursuing its geopolitical interests in surrounding countries does not preclude it from wanting to influence regime types. Neither does engaging in regime competition with the United States and the EU mean that it is only motivated by domestic regime considerations. But these cannot be separated from strategic considerations in Russia’s neighborhood policy, just as the Western countries think democratization produces strategic benefits abroad while also ensuring the perpetuation of own values. Regime motivations should not be expected to explain all Russian actions either, just as they do not explain all EU and US actions. For both sides, decisions are shaped by the interplay of competing interests. Democratic and autocratic powers alike have good relations with dissimilar states and bad relations with similar

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18 Babayan, “The return of the empire?.”
19 See for example Igor Torbakov, “What Does Russia Want?” Investigating the Interrelationship between Moscow’s Domestic and Foreign Policy,” DGAP, May 2011.
ones when it suits their interests. This does not mean they do not engage in regime protection and promotion, but simply that each decision to do so or not is subordinated to overall foreign policy goals.

**Ideology, Strategy and Instruments**

Compared to the Soviet Union, Russia today perhaps does not appear to have an ideology as well as a strategy and instruments to promote it. Yet having a strictly codified, declared ideology and strategy is not a precondition for a state to engage in regime competition. As Christopher Walker points out, today's major authoritarian powers may not be ideological in the Cold War sense, but ideas matter to them and they try to prevent the emergence of alternative ones to theirs, at least within their own systems.\(^{24}\)

Branding Russia's undemocratic features and the ones it supports abroad as an “ideology” depends on how the term is defined. These features may also have come about in an improvised way rather than following a blueprint. Nevertheless, they amount to a coherent body of undemocratic and illiberal norms that are becoming institutionalized. As one analyst puts it, a quasi-state ideology has emerged in Russia, at first defensively in relation to the West and then developing its own domestic momentum.\(^{25}\) This quasi-ideology mixes the “vertical” arrangement of state power, personalized rule, the replacement of electoral choice with uncompetitive plebiscites, the primacy of state interests over individual and civil freedoms, traditional socio-religious conservative or reactionary values, and the idea of Russia as a distinct civilization entitled to organize itself without reference to the outside. Intermittent semi-official attempts to define all of this through labels such as “sovereign democracy” suggest a partial desire to meld these components into an ideological whole.

Russia's quasi-ideology has inevitably influenced its foreign policy, especially toward the post-Soviet states, and is closely mixed with Putin's Eurasian vision.\(^{26}\) The regime seeks to build within a Russian sphere of influence a different international order, with different international institutions, from the one that has prevailed since the end of the Cold War in which outside interest in a country's political order became a norm. Its quasi-ideology is thus also closely linked to developing a narrative of denouncing U.S. hegemony. Russia has also been at the forefront of wider international diplomatic attempts to curb democracy promotion and international civil society support, to delegitimize foreign criticism of regimes, and to preach the equivalence between political models.\(^{27}\) It is part of a group of authoritarian powers, such as China, that increasingly challenge democratic norms in international institutions, protect each other's values, and undermine potential democratizing trendsetters in their regions.\(^{28}\)

In addition, the line between where countering democracy promotion ends and autocracy promotion begins is inevitably blurred. By definition, at least some counter-democracy promotion involves advocating values that are contrary to the openness of societies and freedoms of speech and association. The same applies to propping up authoritarian rulers, even where it is done for strategic reasons. Furthermore, the distinction between whether Russia's motivation in this regard is reactive or proactive is irrelevant if either way its actions are the same and have the same impact. In the same way that an undemocratic quasi-ideology has evolved in Russia, the sum of its actions abroad — however reactive, improvised, or tactical each may be — amount to a coherent, embryonic quasi-strategy to support and promote undemocratic norms.\(^{29}\)

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26 Shevtsova, “The Russia Factor”; Trenin, Russia’s Breakout from the Post–Cold War System.
27 Ambrosio, Authoritarian Backlash.
29 The point is also argued in Whitehead, “Antidemocracy Promotion.”
The West’s democracy promotion strategy — to the extent that there is one today — emerged from a cumulative, unplanned process. This was fueled by the combination of ambition, capacity and opportunity that became especially propitious with Western power predominant at the end of the Cold War. Russia’s recent behavior shows that a similar combination can produce a similar process in autocratic powers. It is no coincidence that its campaign against democracy promotion and democratization developed in parallel with its economic resurgence in the 2000s. This gave Russia the means to rebuild an interventionist policy in its neighborhood as well as refueling its ambition to do so.

The panoply of EU and U.S. democracy promotion instruments has also evolved without any master-plan, with the need for them coming from new objectives being set over time. Here again, there are signs of a similar evolutionary process happening in Russia as it gradually institutionalizes state and non-state mechanisms to meet its expanding regime-related goals abroad.

However, while Russia seems to be at an early stage of a similar process as the one the Western countries went through in democracy promotion, there is no certainty it will follow their trajectory perfectly, on the same scale, or to the same endpoint. Just as changes in domestic and international conditions triggered the process, new changes could stop Russia along this track or even make it retreat. And if, as some argue, Russia’s medium- or long-term international power prospects are not good, it is also worth viewing its actions as intended to use its recent window of opportunity to lock in regime gains in its neighborhood before its ability to do so declines again.

Implications for Democracy Promotion

In the current international environment, U.S. and European democracy promoters, as Thomas Carothers points out, can either retreat or adapt to continue. If they are to have any impact in the countries concerned, their existing policies need to take more into account Russian counter-actions. New ones are also needed in less traditional areas and channels where Russia has been active.

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Russia’s containment and rollback of the Western democracy agenda has been more focused because its overall foreign policy attention is on far fewer countries. In turn, democracy promoters need to think more strategically, especially about the post-Soviet space, in order to contain and roll back Russian undemocratic influence. They should not seek any overriding framework for countries that differ too much in their combinations of domestic and international factors. Sub-group frameworks might be useful, e.g. in the Caucasus, but democracy policy has to be designed above all with a country focus. And, while it is impossible to address post-Soviet countries without reference to Russia, it is also crucial not to treat democracy policy toward any one of them as subsidiary to Russia policy, but instead to address them on connected and parallel but equal tracks.

Especially at a time of financial constraints in the West, a more strategic approach requires stricter prioritization of resources for countries that have made the most progress and are in a more democratic international context, i.e. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. They present the greater chances for success. As well as helping them individually, this could lead to long-term diffusion impact in their sub-regions.

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30 See the forthcoming report by Orysia Lutsevych for Chatham House, 2015.
The democracy promotion context domestically and internationally is worst in Central Asia. Even a slight chance of impact there would require a large increase in resources that could be used toward more likely, earlier results elsewhere. Support to democratic actors in these countries should not be abandoned, but in the current environment, focusing on basic human rights conditions has more chance of having at least some impact. The United States and the EU could learn from how the Helsinki Process furthered human rights in the Warsaw Pact countries and eventually opened space for democratization there (while bearing in mind that autocrats can also learn from this). Fighting back against counter-democracy promotion in closing or closed societies, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus, requires the EU and the United States to adapt programs and tools that were designed at a time of greater openness. This also applies to Russia, which is too important regionally and globally to give up on its prospects, no matter how difficult promoting democracy is there now. Here they could revisit the lessons of early attempts in the Soviet Union and other countries, especially Poland in the 1980s, before the geopolitical context began favoring democracy promotion.

Russia's actions show the need to develop a fuller concept of democracy protection against outside reactionary influences. alongside the existing democracy promotion mix. This also applies to the Balkans EU candidate countries and even to some EU members where it is assumed that transitions were completed. In the latter, this is primarily a matter for the EU and raises important questions about how to support democratization within member states. There is in theory no reason why the United States cannot contribute to this, and it should return its attention to countries that it considered to have “graduated” from democracy assistance several years ago.

Russia's support for autocrats also shows the need for democracy protection extending beyond democracy aid to stronger diplomatic, economic, and security support to democratizing governments when they face challenges on these fronts, and not only from Russia. The EU and United States can also look for ways of supporting more directly democratic actors where they are clearly in competition for power with undemocratic ones backed by Russia or others.

All of the above is not to say, however, that democracy promoters should mirror Russian actions for the sake of it, or that they should follow Russia in ways and areas that are undemocratic or unethical. But they must accept that at a fundamental level, democracy promotion is about intervening in other countries' politics. The question is whether or not this is done in an open and ethical way that accords with democratic principles, which may be an uncomfortable question but it needs to be confronted.

Democracy protection and rolling back autocracy promotion must also take place within international organizations. Contrary to what was assumed for many years, bodies with universal or regional membership (such as the UN system, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe) should be considered more as arenas of competition over democracy norms since autocratic powers are trying alter their agendas or to rid them of their democratic content, and not
just as channels for carrying out democracy promotion. This will require the EU and United States to do more to build up explicit democracy caucuses within these institutions. Since autocracies have created their own security and economic organizations, democracies should reaffirm or make more explicit the democracy dimensions of their own ones, especially NATO. More attention also should be paid to strengthening issue-specific, democratic-membership bodies such as the Community of Democracies and the Open Government Partnership.

Ultimately, all of the above and the difficult geopolitical context for democracy promotion confront the EU and United States with the necessity for greater collaboration and coordination. This is unavoidable to compensate for the greater costs imposed by the current climate, not least because a return to the unusually favorable environment of the 1990s should not be expected.

Truly transatlantic democracy promotion is still embryonic but there are signs of convergence in strategies and instruments. It also worked well in Central Europe in the past. Given the number of countries involved and of actors within each of them, a substantial diversity of interests, perspectives, and approaches cannot be avoided but there should be recognition of how this affects pushing back against the closing space. The institutional cultures of democracy promotion actors must be encouraged to evolve so as to at least smooth the edges of ideological and technocratic differences, turf issues, and the inevitable element of competition (for funding especially).

Greater collaboration and coordination should not be about restricting or directing these actors. As well as reflecting the pluralist societies they come from, their diversity brings valuable advantages. There are legitimate reasons for the existing obstacles to democracy promotion collaboration among and within countries, so trying to encourage this should not set unrealistic goals that only guarantee failure. It does not mean, however, giving up on trying.

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About the Author
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33 Carothers and Brechenmacher, Closing Space.