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The EU–Russia Power Struggle over Eastern Partnership Countries: Stability and Influence in the “Near Abroad”¹

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Abstract

This article investigates the geopolitical dynamics and security strategies shaping the “Near Abroad,” i.e. the states bordering Russia that emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Utilizing a dual theoretical framework of institutionalism and realism, the study explores how the European Union (EU) and Russia engage in strategic competition over influence in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Focusing on the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as case studies, the analysis reveals the EU’s reliance on soft power, emphasizing economic integration and democratic reforms, in contrast to Russia’s hard power approach grounded in security and control. Based on a qualitative methodology that includes document analysis and historical-political contextualization, the findings highlight how these competing strategies impact regional stability and the foreign policy decisions of EaP countries. The study underscores the complexity of EU–Russia relations and provides new insights in the challenges faced by Eastern Partnership states navigating between these rival influences.

Keywords

European Union, Russia, Eastern partnership, near abroad, near neighbourhood

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1. Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 redefined the geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, creating a contested region referred to as the “Near Abroad.” For Russia, this area represents a strategic buffer zone essential for national security and influence (Kozhemiakin and Kanet 1997: 28–29). Concurrently, the European Union (EU) emerged as a normative actor aiming to promote stability, democracy, and economic integration in the same region. The interplay between these divergent strategic objectives has led to persistent competition. The “Near Abroad” became a theatre for conflicting approaches: (1) Russia’s realist perspective focused on maintaining dominance through military interventions, energy politics, and regional organizations like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU); (2) EU’s Institutionalism prioritized soft power tools, such as the Eastern Partnership (EaP), emphasizing governance reforms, trade agreements, and democratic alignment. These strategies have significantly influenced regional dynamics, shaping the policies and alignments of states like Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (DeBardleben 2018: 97–10).

The EU’s engagement with the so-called “Near Abroad” is primarily driven by its desire to promote stability, democracy, and economic integration in the region, thereby reducing the risk of conflict and enhancing security along its eastern borders (Boonstra and Shapovalova 2017: 145–148). The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership are key components of the EU’s strategy to achieve these objectives, offering a range of incentives to countries that align themselves with EU standards and values (Delcour and Kostanyan 2014: 2–5). Through the EaP, the EU seeks to strengthen its ties with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, promoting political association, economic integration, and democratic reforms in these countries (European Commission 2020). Russia’s approach to the “Near Abroad” is shaped by its historical ties, strategic interests, and desire to maintain its influence in the region. Russia views the expansion of Western institutions, such as the EU and NATO, into the “Near Abroad” as a direct challenge to its strategic interests and a threat to its national security. In response, Russia has sought to promote alternative forms of regional integration, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). It has used a combination of economic, political, and military tools to assert its influence in the region (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017: 13–18). The competition between the EU and Russia in the “Near Abroad” has led to a complex and often contentious dynamic, with significant implications for the stability and security of the region.

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine the geopolitical competition between the EU and Russia over influence in the “Near Abroad”, focusing specifically on the EU’s Eastern Partnership and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as case studies. Through comparative analysis, the research investigates the strategies and countermeasures of the EU and Russia, using a combination of document analysis and historical-political

contextualization. Key sources include EU and Russian policy documents, official statements, academic literature, and relevant historical data, which provide a comprehensive understanding of each actor's objectives and actions. By examining these sources, the study traces both the EU's soft power strategies, centred on economic integration and democratic values, and Russia's hard power approach, emphasizing security and control. This methodology provides insight into how the strategic objectives of each actor influence the foreign policy decisions of EaP countries and affect regional stability. The selection of documents for analysis in this study was guided by their relevance, credibility, and ability to provide comprehensive insights into the geopolitical dynamics of the "Near Abroad".

The following criteria were applied to ensure objectivity and methodological rigour: (1) documents were selected based on their direct connection to the themes of EU and Russian strategies in the Eastern Partnership and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Priority was given to policy papers, official statements, and agreements that explicitly addressed the actions, motivations, and outcomes of the competing powers; (2) Primary sources; EU and Russian government documents, official publications from international organizations, and verified statements from key actors were prioritized to provide authoritative value to the policies and strategies under examination. Scholarly articles and books by established researchers in the field were also included to provide analytical depth and contextual understanding; (3) Documents were chosen to capture the temporal evolution of the EU-Russia power dynamics, spanning significant milestones such as the launch of the EaP in 2009 and the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This longitudinal approach ensures that the analysis reflects both historical trends and contemporary developments. To avoid bias, the study incorporated sources representing diverse viewpoints, including EU and Russian policy perspectives, academic critiques, and independent analyses. This multiplicity of perspectives enhances the study's objectivity and ensures a balanced interpretation of the geopolitical competition.

The research is grounded in institutionalism and realism to analyse the strategic motives of the EU and Russia. Institutionalism, with its focus on normative power, frames the EU's use of soft power to promote stability, governance reforms, and market integration in neighbouring states. This approach suggests that the EU's influence in the region is exercised through economic incentives, legal alignment, and policy integration, aimed at creating a stable, cooperative neighbourhood. Conversely, realism underpins Russia's foreign policy actions, viewing its efforts as a defence of national interests and regional security. Russia perceives the EU's expansion as a direct challenge to its influence, prompting a counterstrategy rooted in maintaining a strategic buffer zone around its borders and averting Western encroachment (Russell 2012: 110–112). Through this realist perspective, Russia's actions are contextualized within a broader goal of preserving its geopolitical dominance.

The integration of these frameworks institutionalism to understand the EU's normative agenda and realism to interpret Russia's security-oriented pragmatism offers a comprehensive lens through which to examine their competition in the "Near Abroad". This theoretical approach also allows the study to reveal the deeper ideological divide that drives the complex, often contentious relationship between the EU and Russia in this region. The theoretical frameworks of institutionalism and realism are pivotal to understanding the dynamics of the EU and Russia's competition over influence in the "Near Abroad". Institutionalism emphasizes the role of norms, rules, and cooperative structures in shaping state behaviour. It provides a lens to analyse the EU's soft power strategies, which prioritize economic integration, democratic reforms, and governance improvements to foster regional stability. On the other hand, realism underscores the primacy of power, security, and national interest, offering insights into Russia's hard power approach aimed at maintaining its strategic dominance in the region. Within the EaP context, institutionalism helps explain the EU's efforts to create normative alignment and institutional convergence with its Eastern neighbours. The EU employs trade agreements, financial assistance, and political associations as tools to strengthen ties, reflecting its commitment to multilateral governance and cooperative stability. Conversely, realism highlights Russia's perception of the EaP as a direct challenge to its sphere of influence, prompting countermeasures such as economic pressure, energy leverage, and the promotion of alternative regional organizations like the Eurasian Economic Union. This juxtaposition of frameworks illuminates the strategic dichotomy between the EU's normative agenda and Russia's pragmatic, security-oriented approach.

The application of these frameworks to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict reveals contrasting strategies. Institutionalism elucidates the EU's limited yet norm-driven role, focusing on conflict resolution, humanitarian aid, and regional development, albeit constrained by a lack of direct security capabilities. Realism, however, captures Russia's assertive actions, including its role as a mediator and peacekeeper, which are motivated by strategic interests in maintaining control over the South Caucasus as a buffer against Western expansion. This dual-theoretical analysis underscores how each actor's behaviour in Nagorno-Karabakh reflects broader principles of their foreign policy paradigms. Moreover, the Eastern Partnership and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were chosen as case studies due to their representational significance in showcasing the EU-Russia competition. The EaP highlights a structured policy initiative where soft power tools are employed to engage Eastern European and South Caucasus countries. It reflects the long-term contestation over political and economic alignment in the post-Soviet space. Meanwhile, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict represents a high-stakes geopolitical hotspot, where Russia's security-oriented dominance contrasts with the EU's normative aspirations.

Together, these cases encapsulate the theoretical dichotomy between institutionalism and realism and offer diverse yet complementary perspectives on the

power struggle in the region. The analysis explores the strategic objectives and actions of the EU and Russia in the region, as well as the broader implications of their competition for regional stability and security. The article is structured as follows: The first section provides an overview of the historical context and strategic objectives of the EU and Russia in the “Near Abroad”. The second section presents a case study of the Eastern Partnership, examining the EU’s efforts and achievements, as well as Russia’s countermeasures. The third section discusses the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, highlighting the roles of the EU and Russia and the implications of their involvement for regional stability. The final section concludes with an analysis of the policy implications of the EU-Russia competition in the “Near Abroad”.

2. Historical Context and Strategic Objectives

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a pivotal moment in global politics, reshaping the geopolitical landscape and altering the balance of power in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. This period saw the emergence of several newly independent states, collectively referred to as the “Near Abroad”, a term used by Russia to denote its neighbouring countries that were once part of the Soviet Union. For Russia, the “Near Abroad” represents a strategic buffer zone and an area of significant influence that it seeks to maintain control over (Adams 1998: 50–51). Since the early 1990s, Russia has pursued a foreign policy that aims to assert its influence over these countries through a combination of political, economic, and military means.

On the other hand, the European Union has sought to extend its influence into the “Near Abroad” by promoting democracy, economic development, and integration into European structures (Boonstra and Shapovalova 2017: 148–149). The EU’s Eastern Partnership, launched in 2009, represents a key component of this strategy, offering economic incentives, financial aid, and political support to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (European Union 2009). The EaP aims to foster closer ties between these countries and the EU, encouraging them to adopt European standards and reforms in exchange for access to EU markets and financial assistance (Delcour and Wolczuk 2015: 18–19). Russia’s strategic objectives in the “Near Abroad” are driven by several factors. Firstly, Russia views the expansion of the EU and NATO into its perceived sphere of influence as a direct threat to its national security and regional dominance (Kaunert 2022: 6–10). As a result, it has employed a variety of tools, including energy politics, military interventions, and diplomatic pressure, to prevent these countries from aligning too closely with Western institutions. Secondly, Russia seeks to maintain its economic and political influence over the “Near Abroad” by establishing and supporting regional organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (Milosevich 2021: 3–8). These organizations serve as a

counterbalance to the EU and NATO, offering an alternative framework for cooperation and integration.

The EU's strategic objectives in the “Near Abroad” are centred around promoting stability, democracy, and economic development in the region. The EU believes that by supporting political and economic reforms in these countries, it can create a stable and prosperous neighbourhood that is less susceptible to conflict and external influence. This strategy is based on the EU's broader goal of promoting peace and security in Europe through the spread of democratic values and the rule of law (Zajaczkowski 2018: 56–57). The EU's approach to the “Near Abroad” is characterized by the use of soft power, offering incentives such as financial assistance, visa liberalization, and trade agreements to encourage reforms and align these countries with EU standards. However, their competing strategic objectives have often led to tensions and conflicts in the region, as each side seeks to assert its influence and protect its interests. The conflict in Ukraine, the war in Georgia, and the ongoing tensions in the South Caucasus are examples of the complex and often contentious dynamics between Russia and the EU in the “Near Abroad” (Bajor 2021: 152–153). In summary, the historical context and strategic objectives of Russia and the EU in the “Near Abroad” are shaped by a combination of geopolitical, economic, and security considerations. While Russia seeks to maintain its influence and prevent the expansion of Western institutions into its perceived sphere of influence, the EU aims to promote stability, democracy, and economic development in the region. These competing objectives have significant implications for the stability and security of the “Near Abroad”, as well as for the broader dynamics of EU-Russia relations.

3. Case Study: The Eastern Partnership

The Eastern Partnership, launched in 2009, is a significant initiative by the European Union to enhance its relations with six Eastern European and South Caucasus countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (European Commission 2011). The EaP aims to promote political association, economic integration, and democratic reforms in these countries, aligning them closer to EU standards and values (Council of the European Union 2017).

This case study examines the EU's efforts and achievements through the EaP and analyses Russia's countermeasures in response to the initiative. The EaP is a key element of the EU's broader European Neighbourhood Policy, which seeks to foster stability, security, and prosperity in the EU's neighbouring regions. Through the EaP, the EU offers a range of incentives to its Eastern partners, including financial assistance, and support for political and economic reforms (Żukrowska et al. 2017: 19). The initiative is structured around four thematic platforms: democracy, good governance and stability; economic integration and convergence with EU policies; energy security; and people-to-people contacts (European Commission 2020). One of the primary achievements of the EaP has

been the negotiation and signing of Association Agreements (AAs) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) with several Eastern partner countries. These agreements aim to facilitate political association and economic integration between the EU and its Eastern partners, promoting closer ties and alignment with EU standards (Kostanyan and Delcour 2014: 3). For example, the EU signed AAs and DCFTAs with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in 2014, significantly boosting trade and investment flows between these countries and the EU. The agreements also include provisions for visa liberalization, enabling greater mobility for citizens of the partner countries. Despite these achievements, the EaP has faced several challenges. The varying levels of commitment to reforms among the Eastern partners, coupled with political instability and corruption, have hindered the implementation of the AAs and DCFTAs in some cases (Kostanyan and Delcour 2014: 3–4).

Additionally, the EU's efforts to promote democracy and human rights in the region have been met with resistance from authoritarian regimes, particularly in Belarus and Azerbaijan (European External Action Service 2017). Furthermore, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan have highlighted the complex security dynamics in the region, posing significant challenges to the EU's efforts to promote stability and peace. In response to the EU's EaP initiative, Russia has intensified its efforts to maintain influence in the region. Russia views the EaP as a direct challenge to its strategic interests and a threat to its traditional sphere of influence (Zagorski 2011: 42–44). As a countermeasure, Russia has promoted the Eurasian Economic Union, which was established in 2015 and includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, with Russia as the dominant player (Rotaru 2018: 95–115).

The EAEU aims to promote economic integration and cooperation among its member states, offering an alternative to the EU's integration efforts. Moreover, Russia has used a combination of economic pressure and political influence to dissuade EaP countries from aligning too closely with the EU. For example, in 2013, Russia imposed a series of trade embargoes and economic sanctions on Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia in response to their intention to sign AAs and DCFTAs with the EU (Popescu 2014). Russia has also leveraged its energy resources as a tool of influence, offering discounted gas prices and financial assistance to countries that join the EAEU or align with its policies (Jonavicius et al. 2019).

Despite Russia's efforts to counter the EaP, several Eastern partners have continued to pursue closer ties with the EU, demonstrating the appeal of the EU's model of governance and economic integration. For example, Georgia and Moldova have made significant progress in implementing the reforms required by their AAs and DCFTAs, despite the challenges posed by Russia's actions. Ukraine, despite the ongoing conflict in its eastern regions, has also remained committed to its European integration path, implementing key reforms and aligning its legislation with EU standards. In conclusion, the Eastern Partnership represents a critical component of the EU's strategy to promote

stability, democracy, and economic integration in its eastern neighbourhood. While the initiative has achieved notable successes, it has also faced significant challenges, particularly in the face of Russia’s countermeasures. The ongoing competition between the EU and Russia in the region underscores the complex dynamics of the “Near Abroad” and the broader implications for European security and stability.

4. Case Study: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict represents one of the most complex and enduring disputes in the post-Soviet space, with significant implications for both regional stability and the broader dynamics of EU-Russia relations. This conflict, primarily between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, has its roots in the early 20th century but escalated into a full-scale war in the late 1980s and early 1990s following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Despite multiple attempts at resolution, the conflict has remained unresolved, with periodic flare-ups and a recent large-scale war in 2020, which ended with a ceasefire brokered by Russia (Davtyan 2024: 28–30).

This discussion examines the roles of Russia and the EU in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, their strategic interests, and the implications of their involvement in the stability of the region. Russia has historically played a pivotal role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, acting as a mediator and peacekeeper while simultaneously maintaining close ties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia’s strategic interests in the region are driven by its desire to maintain its influence in the South Caucasus and prevent the expansion of Western institutions, such as the EU and NATO, into its perceived sphere of influence. In the aftermath of the 2020 war, Russia deployed peacekeeping forces to the Nagorno-Karabakh region as part of the ceasefire agreement, thereby solidifying its role as a key security actor in the region (Government of Armenia 2020).

The EU’s involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been more limited compared to Russia, primarily focused on supporting conflict resolution efforts and promoting economic development and stability in the region. The EU has provided financial and technical assistance to support peace-building initiatives, confidence-building measures, and humanitarian aid in conflict-affected areas (European Parliament 2024). However, the EU’s ability to influence the conflict has been constrained by its limited leverage over the parties involved and its reluctance to engage in direct mediation or peacekeeping efforts.

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and the subsequent ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia have significantly altered the dynamics of the conflict and the roles of external actors. Russia’s deployment of peacekeeping forces has not only reinforced its position as the dominant security actor in the region but also raised concerns about its long-term intentions and the potential for increased militarization of the conflict. On the other hand, the EU’s limited involvement in the conflict has underscored its challenges in

exerting influence in the South Caucasus and its reliance on diplomatic and economic tools to promote stability and conflict resolution. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict also highlights the broader implications of the EU-Russia competition in the “Near Abroad”. The conflict has served as a focal point for the divergent strategic interests and approaches of the EU and Russia in the region. While Russia seeks to maintain its influence and prevent the expansion of Western institutions, the EU aims to promote stability, democracy, and economic integration in the South Caucasus (DeBardeleben 2015: 98–99).

These competing objectives have created a complex and often contentious dynamic between the EU and Russia, with significant implications for the stability and security of the region. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict represents a significant challenge for both the EU and Russia, highlighting the complexities of their involvement in the region and the broader dynamics of their competition in the “Near Abroad”. The conflict underscores the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to conflict resolution that takes into account the interests and concerns of all parties involved, as well as the broader implications for regional stability and security.

From the analysis, it becomes evident that Russia perceives the Eastern Partnership as a direct challenge to its influence in the former Soviet republics. Moscow views the EU's involvement in the region, particularly through the EaP, as a threat to its traditional sphere of influence. The EU's Eastern Partnership is seen by Russia as a tool to extend influence in the East without direct territorial expansion. Moscow is sceptical of the EU's motives, interpreting the EaP as a potential instrument for encroaching on Russia's historical sphere of influence. Russia's interest in the “Near Abroad” is driven by security concerns, historical considerations, and economic interests. The former Soviet republics are seen as crucial for defending Russia's territory, and the EU's engagement challenges Moscow's dominance in the region.

There is notable economic competition between the EU and Russia for influence in the EaP countries. The increasing economic ties between EaP nations and the EU, as well as their efforts to align with European standards, are perceived by Moscow as a challenge to its economic dominance. In response, Russia established the Eurasian Economic Union as an alternative economic bloc, aiming to counterbalance the EU's influence and prevent further integration of EaP countries into the European market. However, Russia has faced challenges in maintaining its influence. Ukraine and Georgia have shifted away from Russian influence, and others, like Moldova, pursue independent foreign policies. This loss of dominance is evident both politically and economically.

The fundamental conflict between the EU and Russia in their perceptions of the “shared neighbourhood” underscores the complexity of the region. While the EU aims to create a “ring of well-governed countries” through soft power and integration (Wolfschwenger 2020: 1–4), Russia sees these efforts as a threat to its interests. Moscow's traditional view of sovereignty clashes with the EU's approach of promoting human rights

and democratic values in EaP countries, viewing such interventions as encroachments on its sphere of influence. The geopolitical landscape in Eastern Europe is further complicated by competition between the EU, Russia, and even China. The rise of China's soft power and Moscow's long-term strategic plans add to the uncertainty and unpredictability in the region. The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict catalysed Armenia's reevaluation of its geopolitical priorities, leading to a notable shift towards closer ties with the EU (Politico 2024). Armenia's desire for diversified partnerships and enhanced security guarantees challenges Russia's traditional dominance (Politico 2024). As Armenia seeks to reduce its dependence on Russia (Terzyan 2019: 33–34) it has intensified engagement with the EU across various sectors, including security, economy, and governance.

However, this recalibration also entails risks, particularly in strained relations with Russia, highlighting the delicate balancing act Armenia must navigate in pursuit of greater autonomy and resilience. Meanwhile, Russia's war against Ukraine has underscored the significance of hard power and geopolitics, prompting EU member states to reconsider their policies towards Eastern Partnership countries. The conflict has blurred the lines between the Eastern Partnership and EU enlargement policy, with Moldova and Ukraine receiving candidate status amid heightened geopolitical tensions (European Commission 2023). These decisions demonstrate solidarity with Eastern partners but also pose challenges for the future of the Eastern Partnership as it grapples with potential shifts in multilateral relations and the need for successful transformations in partner countries. The shifting dynamics in the Eastern Partnership region reflect broader geopolitical trends and the ongoing competition between major powers.

Russia has traditionally played a dominant role in the conflict, employing a realist approach that emphasizes hard power and strategic balancing. Acting as both mediator and peacekeeper, Russia brokered the ceasefire agreement that ended the 2020 conflict and deployed peacekeeping forces to monitor the region. By maintaining close military and political ties with both Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia has ensured that neither country aligns too closely with Western institutions like NATO or the EU, reinforcing its influence through military presence and political leverage.

In contrast, the EU's involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict reflects its institutionalist orientation, prioritizing diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, and conflict prevention. The EU has supported peace-building initiatives and confidence-building measures in the region, often through platforms like the EaP, which aim to encourage dialogue and regional cooperation. Following the 2020 conflict, the EU provided significant humanitarian aid and funding for post-conflict reconstruction, addressing the immediate needs of displaced populations while fostering conditions for long-term stability. Additionally, the EU has engaged in diplomatic efforts, supporting the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Minsk Group and advocating for adherence to international norms and peaceful resolutions. Despite these efforts, the EU's

role in the conflict remains constrained by significant limitations. Unlike Russia, the EU lacks direct leverage in the region, as it does not have a military presence or offer security guarantees, which limits its influence on conflict parties. Furthermore, the EU's fragmented approach, spread across various institutions and initiatives, reduces the effectiveness of its actions. The absence of a unified strategy toward the South Caucasus has hindered its ability to act decisively in critical situations. This marginal position was evident during the 2020 ceasefire negotiations, where the EU was largely excluded, with Russia and Turkey dominating the process.

Theoretical perception from institutionalism and realism help contextualize the roles of the EU and Russia in this conflict. The EU's reliance on soft power tools, such as diplomacy, financial aid, and support for international legal norms, reflects its institutionalist framework. Meanwhile, Russia's actions are rooted in realist principles, prioritizing hard power to maintain control over the South Caucasus and secure its strategic interests. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict illustrates the challenges the EU faces in exerting meaningful influence in regions dominated by Russian hard power. While the EU's institutionalist approach contributes to long-term peace-building and development, its limited capacity to address immediate security concerns constrains its ability to mediate high-intensity conflicts. This disparity underscores the broader challenges in the EU-Russia competition, particularly in regions where security considerations overshadow economic and normative incentives.

5. Conclusion

The competition between the European Union and Russia in the "Near Abroad" underscores the complex interplay of institutionalism and realism in shaping foreign policy strategies. Through the case studies of the Eastern Partnership and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, this article highlighted the distinct approaches of these two powers: the EU's reliance on soft power, emphasizing normative influence and economic integration, versus Russia's hard power approach, rooted in security dominance and geopolitical pragmatism. The EaP exemplifies the EU's efforts to foster stability and governance reform through economic and political incentives, yet it also reveals the challenges of navigating external pressures and internal vulnerabilities within partner countries. Russia's countermeasures, including the use of economic coercion and the promotion of alternative frameworks like the Eurasian Economic Union, demonstrate the persistent obstacles to the EU's normative agenda in regions where security concerns take precedence. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict illustrates the EU's limitations in addressing high-intensity conflicts dominated by Russian influence. While the EU has contributed to peace-building and humanitarian efforts, its lack of military presence and direct leverage has marginalized its role in conflict mediation. Russia's realist strategy of deploying

peacekeeping forces and maintaining close ties with Armenia and Azerbaijan underscores the EU's challenge in asserting influence where hard power is decisive.

The competition not only influences the policies and alignment of Eastern Partnership countries but also reveals each power's limitations; Russia struggles with the shifting allegiances of countries like Armenia, while the EU faces challenges in exerting influence in areas where its economic tools are insufficient against security concerns. The shifting alliances in the Eastern Partnership, especially Armenia's recent drift toward the EU and Ukraine's candidacy for EU membership, indicate a potential recalibration in the balance of influence. These changes underscore the need for both the EU and Russia to navigate these partnerships with consideration for the evolving geopolitical landscape. As the EU continues to pursue an agenda of democracy and economic reform in its neighbouring regions, the durability of these alliances amidst Russian countermeasures will be key to the region's stability and security.

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