

Virtual Frontiers and Physical Walls: Bordering Russia in the era of Modernization of Power.

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In the contemporary world the concept of “bordering” is acquiring increasingly multidimensional and ambiguous meanings. After a period in which globalization tended to reduce borders, new forces are reshaping them. Information technology (IT) and the diffuse, renewable nature of modern energy systems complicate traditional boundaries, even as the weaponization of connectivity and active conflicts—most notably in Ukraine and Gaza, but also in Sudan, Iran and elsewhere—have made physical borders more salient. These dynamics are reinforced by de-globalization and a renewed emphasis on self-reliance to preserve critical domestic production (for example, energy production in the United States) and by policies such as “friendshoring.”¹

These developments occur against a changing nature of power and threats—perception of which might be called a “modernization of minds,” including evolving concepts of victory in war and competition. Our study of recent conflicts shows that the meaning of borders has transformed alongside shifting conceptions of power driven by IT and the energy transition.² Cyber and hybrid threats blur origin points and transcend traditional boundaries. At the same time, IT that dissolves geographic barriers and promotes universal reach also transfers fragmentation and hostility into virtual spaces.

Thus, bordering of the nation-state increasingly represents a tension between two tendencies. On one side are efforts to strengthen defense and security—against aggression, irregular migration, organized crime and economic vulnerabilities—reinforced by policies of domestic self-reliance. On the other side is the virtualization of threats that bypass physical borders. In its turn, within the IT tension exists between its universalizing outreach, which can spread shared values across communities and nations, and the simplified, often polarizing nature of online confrontation.

Whether European policies toward its neighbours are proactive or merely reactive carries critical importance. This debate intersects with the choice between transactional and value-based foreign policies. Recent cuts to aid and diplomatic spending in Europe suggest a tilt toward transactional approaches—mirroring trends promoted by the Trump administration—and have been reinforced by the growing influence of far-right and conservative parties across Europe. These parties exert a twofold effect: culturally they emphasize difference and foster confrontation between nations, while politically and economically some have pursued closer ties, financial relations, and cooperation with illiberal institutions in Russia.

Another channel eroding Europe’s normative fabric is corruption—primarily political corruption. An asymmetry exists: in Russia, corruption is often systemic; in Europe, corruption

¹ Hadi Zarea, Zhan Su “ Friendshoring in international business: Theoretical Foundations and a Typological Framework”, *Journal of International Management*, 13 March 2026

² Alieva, Leila, Aslanov, Bakhtiyar “How Autocracy Impedes De-Securitization: Case Study of Nagorno-Karabagh”, *Caucasus Survey*, April, 2018.

is formally illegal and can be exposed by the media and punished by institutions (although recent normalization and weak reputational consequences for some politicians have reduced this constraint). From this follow two kinds of challenges to European resilience in relation to Russia: indirect challenges that operate through relatively consensual channels (illiberal political forces, corruption, organized crime) and direct, confrontational threats that undermine European values and institutions through hostile narratives, cyberattacks, and exploitation of state vulnerabilities. The former deepen as illiberal forces grow; the latter are most effective when citizens feel socially and politically excluded or when foreign-policy decisions lack deliberation and clarity.

The European Union, in bordering Russia, is not a passive recipient of influence and threats; it is an active agent engaged in interaction. This is less about simple power projection and more about creating conditions that enable societies to realize their potential despite authoritarian control in neighbouring states. States can respond to threats in two broad ways. One is to increase military capabilities and adopt a firmer military posture to deter aggression—an approach that has been easier for countries close to Russia (Poland, the Baltic states) than for those farther away. The other is to address root causes of conflicts, including pursuing policies that recognize the historical and potential contributions of neighbouring societies to a democratic and peaceful international order. Reliance on aggressive military solutions, such as by Russia, can signal a state's weakness—its inability to build an attractive model or to exercise effective soft power. Reframing “greatness” from military dominance to constructive international significance can make a nation-state a source or contributor to open, free societies.

One practical path is to help Russian society discover an added value within the European and global economy and to encourage contributions to democracy and liberal norms.³ Such outreach can be communicated through internet channels, conferences, people-to-people exchanges and official diplomacy. The migration of Russian IT specialists—those avoiding conscription and relocating to South Caucasus states or Europe (“relocanti”) during the Ukraine war—illustrates a potential positive contribution that could benefit neighbouring states and the broader European economy.

A proactive soft-power strategy should contest hearts and minds in societies governed by leaders with questionable legitimacy. In this context, aid, support for civil-society institutions, and independent media become more important than they were during the Cold War. Efforts to control virtual space typically spur technological countermeasures, so soft-power initiatives must avoid appearing conspiratorial. They therefore require higher political visibility—explicit backing in bilateral and multilateral messaging—and a reinvigoration of the universal values of freedom and rights. Such a policy goes beyond debunking fake news or contesting narratives; it must address the domestic and foreign policy gaps and grievances that make populations vulnerable to hostile narratives (for instance, perceptions in Russia that Western policies are inconsistent or overly pragmatic, or the social marginalization and status decline experienced by emigrés).

³ Alieva, Leila Soft Power Lessons from Russia's wars: How to Overcome Polarization and Strengthen Liberal Democracy, Foreign Policy Center, London, 2024 <https://fpc.org.uk/soft-power-lessons-from-russias-war-how-to-overcome-polarisation-and-strengthen-liberal-democracy/>

Soviet and other authoritarian legacies may also shape political preferences. Rather than simple anti-leftist sentiment⁴, many ex-Soviet voters' attraction to ultra-right and nationalist parties stems from a lack of liberal political experience and feelings of status loss. The effects of "bordering" Russia will therefore differ across Europe and Russia, depending on domestic politics in these states and the international context. A shift toward a multipolar or multilateral world, with changing alliances and power centers, will alter Russia's ability to pursue expansionist policies.

Russian society generally identifies culturally with Europe more than with the East, and in times of crisis Russians are likely to migrate westward. Sanctions may be imposed or lifted depending on political leadership in the United States and the regime in Russia, while soft-power channels—music, language, and the arts—will remain vehicles for influence and propaganda.

Europe should combine strong defense against possible military adventurism with efforts to help Russian society find a positive, distinct identity and an added value in bilateral, regional and international cooperation—contributing to peace, freedom and human dignity through the co-creation of democratic principles and practices.

⁴ Djessie Litghart (2019) Communist Regime Experience and Immigrant Voting Behaviour” , Master's thesis, Leiden University.

<https://studenttheses.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2629506/view#:~:text=Therefore%20my%20research%20question%20is%3A,vote%20differently%20from%20other%20migrants%3F>