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Regional Implications of Russian Influence On Eastern Partnership Countries

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ABSTRACT: The unexpected irredeemable disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, though came as a shock to some of the component republics, was a fulfilled dream to a few others, especially the Baltics regions of the Soviet who had always felt being coerced into the union. Notwithstanding the disposition of either of the sides of the member republics, the Alma Ata Declaration of 1991 in Kazakhstan was a confirmation enough to establish the resolves of the republics to asserting their political independence as sovereign countries. Despite the attainment of sovereignty by the defunct republics, the practical concept of sovereignty in most of the former republics appeared to be nothing more than charade because some of the republics have continued to be politically entangled, subservient or coerced to technically operate under the influence of the Russian Federation. The recurrent and yet unresolved Russia – Ukraine's crisis since 2014 is an exemplar of Russia's influence on the former Soviet republics in the Eastern Europe. In view of this, this research was undertaken to examine the extent of political freedom of the sovereign countries that were formerly members of the Soviet Union and the implications of Russian influence in the regions. The paper employed Neorealism and Regional Hegemonic Stability as its theoretical framework while data was drawn from secondary sources. It was suggested that Russian continued influence in eastern region is not meant to arbitrarily impose hegemonic influence on the former republics. Rather, its seemingly hegemonic activities are largely driven by a pressure against geopolitical isolation and need for national survival.

KEYWORDS: Russia, Eastern partners, Security consciousness, Regional influence, Sovereignty illusion

INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Partnership countries, also here referred to as European Partners (EaPs) comprising Republic of Armenia, Republic of Azerbaijan, Republic of Moldova, Republic of Belarus, Republic of Ukraine and Georgian Republic have generally been adjudged democratically ineffective among the former Soviet Union (F.S.U.) states. Their efforts in establishing and consolidating democracy in their respective regions have always remained frustrated affecting other affairs of the government in terms of territorial integrity, their foreign and national policies. The reason for the seemingly ineffectiveness of democracy among the EaPs are not far-fetched. Russian nationalism in Ukraine raised tensions in all the regions so much that they have become politically destabilized that they could not proudly assert their total independence from Russia. Russian nationalism, which started with Georgia in 2008 and shifted later to Ukraine, has produced result which only has turned the regions to fragments so much that efforts towards strengthening of democracy, maintenance of political stability, achievement of security and regional cooperation have become virtually impossible. Several tactics which combined both the military and soft power have been deployed by the Putin's Russia to cause instability, and violation of the EaPs' independence status.

These strategies are however differently employed in each state as would best protect the interest of Russia in each of them. The gravity of restrictions suffered from the hand of Putin are more intensive on Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova – the three republics that are fast moving toward building democratic state after the Western-oriented liberal democratic principles. Armenia, Belarus and Azerbaijan are less prone to effects of Russian nationalism agenda due to either the close relationships that are occasioned by harmonised interests, and economic independence, as in the case of Azerbaijan, which makes it stands aloof of Russian oppression. The need for the EaPs republics to consolidate their states, having been independent from the extinction of the S.U., occasioned their westward trajectory which remained the reliable hope for them to exist as de facto sovereign state. Apart from a few states, such as, the Baltic which maintains relatively strong economy, many of the former Soviet Union republics, particularly the EaPs, do not have so strong economy to sustain their independent state as they are no more the beneficiaries of the Soviet nationalised resources. Multi-dimensional opportunities that U.S and Western Europe promised to pursue, especially in the area of economic assistance became the elements that dominate their foreign policy patterns and directions. However, the EaPs' eligibility to access the Western offers was not without conditions to satisfy. Membership into the E.U are not granted based on independence only, but

on respective state's political stability, security, liberal democracy, economic strength, guarantee of human rights' protection and rule of law in accordance with the western standard.

The E.U and U.S, while admitting the weakness of the EaPs in perfectly satisfying the conditions, offered to encourage the relationship that would raise their economic status, while other conditions remained uncompromised. A number of partnership programs to integrate both the West and EaP and to enhance the relationship across different areas in the future are launched. The cooperation under the EaP is approached on both bilateral and multilateral bases to encapsulate four major areas: strengthening institutions and good governance, the economic development and market opportunities connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change, and mobility and people-people contact[1].

The EaP's movement into the E.U was intercepted by Russia owing to its geopolitical and national security consciousness. Russia's different perception of sovereign democracy, its apathy for NATO enlargement into regional spaces which it considers as its area of influence and fear of Europe's security structure precipitated its reaction against the European Partnership project. Russia has assumed a position of ideological alternative and regional checkmate to the E.U and NATO, holding different definitions to sovereignty, power and the world order.

While the E.U has been committed to advocating and advancing liberal democracy, Russia felt threatened by its increasing relationship with the FSU which it translated as encroachment on its regional space. The E.U also had found itself challenged by Russia as a distinct Eurasian power with different interests as Russia had refused to accept any conviction from the E.U that European Partnership was a literal relationship that was not aimed against the latter. Though Russia was proclaimed to be a democratic state, its exhibition of true democratic values has not been proven. Its authoritarian democracy could however be alluded to its imperial behaviour which grew out of its history of economic privatization and oppressive regime.

Russia has been alleged by Freedom House for disinformation campaigns during European elections, cultivating ties with xenophobic political parties across Europe, threatening of its 'Near Abroad' (EaPs), and serving as an alternative source of military aid for Middle Eastern dictatorship[2]**.** It was apparent that while Russian became derailed on its democratic path, its tactics has also been to frustrating all attempts by the European Partners to practice a workable democratic state of Western standard, and fracturing their democratic institutions by executing an extensive and multi-faceted policy towards the EaP, aiming at a permanent change in the countries' geopolitical orientation from pro-European into Russia zone of influence.

Subsequent to the disintegration of the USSR, the F.S.U states across the central and Eastern Europe started the process of nation rebuilding vis-a-vis new political institutionalization, establishing independent national identities and designing of a new political framework that would guarantee their political stability and freedom from the Soviet order. The period was erupted with uncertainties especially for some of the former Soviet countries that are closer to Western Europe geographic sphere as they became cynical about the feasibility of their trajectory towards the Western liberal values and joining of their institutions. Virtually all the newly independent states from the S.U were inspired by the Western style democratic system. Thus, they strived to develop their political institutions along with the Western Europe, to build relationship with different countries, and drive both national and independent foreign policies. Although these countries were bent towards adopting democratic values of governance, they however operate on different levels of democracy.

Both pre-Soviet political orientation and communist legacies are responsible for divergence of degree of democracy in practice between the former Soviet republics. A prominent factor lies in the fact that, all of the six republics in partnership that emerged independent from the Soviet Union were estranged to consolidated pre-communist democratic traditions but rather strongly espoused to authoritarianism of the tsarist regime and which continued throughout the Soviet period. The eventual liberation of the republics was a watershed in their political history which ushered in the prospect of workable democracy across the regions. Mostly aspired for democratically oriented government are the Partnership countries.

A stride towards democratisation of the six independent republics was a joint initiative called "the Eastern Partnership (EaP) signed with the E.U and its member states, aimed at building mutual cooperation, shared democracy and multi-lateral relationships that would anchor prosperity and stability among them. The relationship was a calculation by both the Eastern European partners and the E.U to develop a strong leverage to tackle both their national and foreign challenges.

The EaP was an international commitment by the EaP countries not only aimed at asserting their full-fledged sovereignty but also to establish democracy that would produce economic development, legal and administrative capacities and civil society structure in the regions. The decisiveness of the countries on democratization encouraged the E.U's commitment to building strongly beneficial relationship with the EaP countries regardless of the level of tenacity of which the individual country aspire to relate with the E.U. Thus, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was developed in 2004 by the E.U as a framework for EaP program. The ENP appeared to be an incentive to the EaP countries as it offered the process of full participation in the E.U's market and benefits of

[1] Various summits have been convened to launch, reinforce and consolidate these cooperation agreements. These include Warsaw summit, 25-28 Sep.2011, Vilnus summit 28-29 Nov. 2013, Riga summit 22- 23 May 2015, the 5th Eastern partnership summit, Brussel 24 Nov. 2017.

[2]Freedom in the world 2018: democracy in crisis. Par. 23 Freedom House. Abramowitz, M.J.

basic freedoms, provided they adhere to certain fundamental principles and show tangible proofs of progress in democratic values, economic and institutional reforms.

The Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (AA/DCFTAs) were signed in 2014 as a new phase of E.U's EaP efforts towards consolidating their political and economic relationship. The agreement was intended to integrate the two parties into closer relations that are characterised by the standards of other E.U's countries. This policy inspired the visa liberalization or visa-free travel policy to EaP countries starting with the Republic of Moldova in 2013 and later to Ukraine and Georgia. But for some of the six republics including Moldova and Ukraine, the hope of surviving their post-Soviet economic saga, and security of realistic political reformations, independent sovereignty and development of free market democracies was promising only by their membership or at least relations with the E.U and its member countries.

Even, the terms for considering any of the EaP countries for E.U partnership or membership, are underscored by their political stabilities and institutional reforms that support values of liberal democracy. Despite the ambitions of the European Partners in institutionalising democracy, individual countries levels of practice, and the parts they tread are not the same.

Some of the component republics of the USSR comprising Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia have set the pace for consolidated democratic government which some of the EaP countries are striving to catch up with. However, while some republics like Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are genuinely democracy developing countries, other EaPs including Azerbaijan, Belarus and Armenia simulate democracy that is autocratic in nature.

For a clearer picture of degrees of Russian regional influences on the EaP countries as well as touching on their democratic values, Russia's rapprochement with each of the countries are discussed below.

Republic of Armenia

Armenia was a component republic of the USSR, located in the mountainous Caucasus region between Asia and Europe sharing boundaries with Georgia and Azerbaijan in the northern and eastern enclave, and Iran and Turkey to the south and west. The Freedom House 2017 had rated Armenia as hybrid regime by sitting astride authoritarianism and semi-authoritarianism. There is no precision in categorizing the form of government that is being practiced in Republic of Armenia. The aspiration of Armenia to practice Western style liberal democracy and free market principles was demonstrated through its efforts aimed at joining the Council of Europe and the world Trade Organization as a member. Armenia trial to put in place electoral processes that is coherent with international standards degree of practice could not vindicate western world democratic ideas.

Democracy as a social order or political institutions and democratically elected leaders are not indices on their own to adjudge a country as a democratic one. Rather, effectiveness of the system in enhancing the entrenched intrinsic values which include civil rights and freedoms could not be isolated from a real democracy. It could not be affirmed that fundamental values inherent in a true democracy is totally absent from Armenia. Some degree of self-governance, concession of civil rights and freedoms portrayed Armenia as a democratic country. Nonetheless, the regime could be described as hybrid regime having the cosmetics of democracy under the guise of democratic institutions that are controlled by authoritarian monopolistic elites.

Low performance or rating of Armenian democratic system was largely connected with its long years of immersion into Soviet authoritarian system. So, democracy was a novel adventure that Armenia embarked upon as a sovereign state that emerged from decades of autocratic impacts.

Armenia government replicates the USSR centralised economic policy which allows the ruling elites to dominate its economic space and taking monopolies of national economy. This legacy formed attitudinal pattern among Armenian authorities who perceived their official positions as opportunities to satisfy their personal interest without demonstrating senses of democratic responsibilities and accountability.

Transformation of their socio-economic and political structure came with flaws. The liberal economic relation, in addition to its failure of improving the welfare of the population, created the communication gap between the authority and the masses who felt estranged from electoral processes. A wide spectrum of Armenia has discredited the regime for authoritarianism**.** Armenia's principle for a new democracy has been thwarted as a result of its war with Azerbaijan. The imperative for the government to ensure the protection of its citizens had caused the authorities to impose strong executive power that sacrifices individual rights for safety of their life. The ruling elites have accumulated political and economic power which they wield in influencing government decision, to checkmate any move that seems to threaten their interests and what they regard as their acquired rights, and have halted processes towards transition to liberal democracy.

In Armenia, reports of impunity for criminal political violence against corrupt government authorities, monopoly of power by the oligarchic group, increasing governmental pressure on independent media, unhealthy political and economic competition among the authorities are prevalent. A survey was conducted in Armenia in 2004 to assess the integrity of the Armenian judiciary. The result showed that only twelve percent of participants opined that the judiciary was not influenced by political authorities. The Armenia authorities demonstrated their lack of resilience to public opinions in 2003 following the result of the presidential election which they denounced for rigging. The authorities made an abusive use of force when the protesters were forcefully dispersed by the Armenian army **(**Raquel and Simao, 2007*, 1-25).*

The history of Russo-Armenia relations had begun in the eighteenth century as the product of Russian Messianism for Armenia to be freed from the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire and establish their own Armenian kingdom. The relationship was reactivated even after the ruin of the Russian Empire with the reintegration of Armenia into Soviet Union when the Union was created in the 1920s. In extension of economic and political assistance offered by Russia, the Armenia fears which was raised by security threats from its neighbouring countries of the South Caucasus and the Middle East was subsided under Russian protection.

As a price to pay for protection, the Armenian government was offered its Armenian city-Gyumri- for Russia to house its 102nd military base to protect Armenia's border. In addition, Russia-Armenia military cooperation has been established to develop a combine air defense system. It was also clear enough that the cost that Armenia would have to pay for Russian provision of security would include the sacrifice of its territorial integrity, independence, and national interests. Although, the Armenia can be sure of its security and stability with the Russia's military presence on his territory, Russia's aim towards monitoring Armenian foreign policies and maintenance of its regional and national security against external forces seemed to have been achieved. Vladimir Putin has always emphasized how important Armenia is to Russia and so, has declared his continual commitment to Armenian cause in terms of territorial security particularly combined with cooperation on policy, trade and natural resources.

Russian influence in Armenia has a stronghold that made the majority of the Armenia consider their relationship with Russia a natural unalterable development which particularly connects with their historical dependence on Russia. The messianic precedence of Russia in Armenia, most especially Russian intervention during the 1915 genocide in Armenia tremendously boosted their confidence and perception about Russia as the only guarantor of Armenia's security.

With the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 and its delicate relationship with Azerbaijan, Armenia's has become increasingly of vital interest that made Russia to still maintain both political and military presence in the South Caucasus. Russia was out to encourage a good relation with Armenia in order to fill the lacuna that outgrew from its frozen relationship with Georgia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus. So, in its effort to maintain its position, it has also been monitoring Armenia's relationship and its move toward signing AA/DCFTA. The 2008 war between Russia and Georgia was a trump card for Russia in curbing further strengthening of Armenia's relation with the E.U (S. Minasyan, 2013: *Russia – Armenian relation: affection or pragmatism?*, 4). Armenia has been left with no choice but to maintain active neutral position between the warring partners for this appeared to be the only guarantor of its own security. So Armenia has considered maintaining military-political cooperation with Russian as essential element of its security and defense policy (Minasyan, 2013, 1).

Media also plays its role in Armenia with opinions spreading about diminishing values and realities of the E.U and its incapacity of the E.U to help the EaP countries as a result of made-to-belief crisis in the organization. Armenia could not see a substitute for Russia in the E.U as a guarantor of its security because of the perceived E.U instability.

The doctrine of Russia's "special path" which has been diffused among the Soviet republics substantiated the opinions among Armenians about the Western Europe as the opposite European world different from the East in terms of values. The west are seen as a corrupt, morally and religious decadent continents whose values are attached to the rights of homosexuality and other vulgar life-styles. The speculated value differences between the two Europe escalated the ambivalence of Armenia's decision to enter into a serious relation with the E.U but instead to embrace a closer relation with Russia even as a member of Russian-led Eurasian Union. Russian arms, investment and political support for Armenia were another dimension of strategy that earned Russia a foothold in Armenia.

Republic of Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan is not one of the post-Soviet republics that could be identified as a democratic state. Both the electoral processes and democratic values are alien to the state structure, the apathy and neglect of the country to democracy could not be disconnected to the history of conflicts between great power that have contested for its territorial control. The country had been subjugated under Russia and Great Britain between 1813 and 1907. The country's long period of subjection tremendously influenced thier mentality which made it convenient for Azerbaijan authorities and the few influential figures in the country to dominate the less privileged citizens by making them dependent on them for their needs.

This is not a proposition that the country is not in any way attempting to make political transformation tailored along democracy. The authorities have taken measures to establish democratic institution, floating political parties and pluralism. These efforts are ironical of the reality of democratic states of Azerbaijan. The government has been personalized by one family since 1993 till the present. Mr. Heydam Aliyev (father) ruled from 1993-2003 and succeeded by Ilham Aliyev (son) who has been ruling since 2003 till present with his wife Mehriban Aliyeva occupying the position of the vice president alongside. Azerbaijan government is ostensibly typical of a dynasty system which stifled the efforts of democratizing Azerbaijan. Under the influence of Mr. Aliyev, a constitutional referendum was organized in 2016 with its result depleting the parliament of enormous powers that were in turn transferred to the president. Though the constitution amendment, the five-year one tenure presidential term was extended to seven year.

The constitution amended allowed for creation of new positions of vice and first vice president to which the president is conferred with power to appoint his loyal courtiers. Apart from the wife of Mr. Ilham Aliyev, the vice president, a wide spectrum has shown

that the constitution amendment was appropriated to create the post of the first vice president for Mr. Aliyev's son (Mammadov, 2016).

With no restrictions on how many tenure a president can run, Mr. Aliyev has got the chance to run campaigns perpetually and win elections at will. Azerbaijani's government under Aliyev is popular for denial of fundamental rights, repression of the media freedom, and imprisonment of political critics. One in the long list of Azerbaijani activists and journalist who became political prisoners was Khadija Ismayilova. Khadijat was considered as the most famous Azerbaijani investigative journalist with Radio Free Europe, and a critic who has published several reports about Azerbaijani officials. Corruption was alleged of collaboration of devising anti-Azerbaijan programs. Committee to protect journalist has ranked Azerbaijan among the worst jailers of journalists and political opposition in the world. Republic of Azerbaijan was known for repression of opposition parties using judicial punishment as a way to deterring oppositions from discussing some certain topic which are seemingly threatening to them[3].

Among the EaP countries, Azerbaijan is less susceptible to Russian overlord compare to other EaPs. Its privileged position could not have been possible without some elements that gave him hedges over other and relative independence from Russia. The country has economic clout as one of the largest oil producing state combined with large gas reserve among the Caucasian and central Asian states that were Soviet members. Unlike Moldova, for instance, which is largely dependent on Russia, Azerbaijan is able to evade close attachment that could put the state under unchecked Russian control. The strategic location of Azerbaijan between Russia, Iran, Western Europe and the Middle East provides the country with an advantage to gain the courtship of Europe and America who find the route easier to link with the country to build relationship. With Azerbaijan strategic position, its advantage of diversifying its energy resources into global market including the Western Europe saves the country from Russia's economic monopoly and manipulations (Mammadov, 2016, 4), such as it was wielded on Moldova and Armenia.

Regardless of the economic hedge that Azerbaijan has over other partners, the country has not been wholesomely free from Russian nationalistic influence. Russia still found a way of creeping into Azerbaijan and exploiting its media space to enforce its interest. In 1992, based on the accord of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)'s heads of states, Russia began the creation of an inter-state Television and Radio company called "MIR" where broadcast was made in Russian. The media station was envisioned toward promoting cooperation among the member states in the political, economic and humanitarian premises and to form a common information space and promote international information exchange. In spite of the fact that the media station broadcast news of the CIS countries, Russian opinions dominated the channel.

There was a wide spectrum as of 2009 in Azerbaijan that there was drastic drop in the population that watched local channels. Although the Azerbaijani authorities have tried to curtail the influence of Russia on its media space by stopping Russian analogue broadcasting on local channels, Russian language still plays a leading role in terms of the coverage of the population by foreign language on cable TV channels. When Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency in 2012, Russian information influence on Azerbaijan became revitalized. Both Russia and Azerbaijan authorities established the Interface-Azerbaijan News Agency in 2002, Novosti-Azerbaijan Agency in 2005 and the Azerbaijani branch of the Sputnik agency in 2014. All the Azerbaijani information agencies are notably not Azerbaijani independent information network; they are rather subsidiary to Russian media agencies which include the Interfax, RIA Novosti and Russia Today.

Regardless of the fact that the information projects were together undertaken by the two countries, the input of the Azerbaijani authority was only the financial sponsor of the projects. Azerbaijan complacency with its sidelined involvement in the Russian-Azerbaijan information project is informed by its decision to satisfy Moscow's information requests and to portray a positive image in Russia and other countries. Since 2009, Azerbaijan has alongside demonstrated its commitment to Russian-Azerbaijan project with the closure of the BBC Azerbaijani services and radio-Azedlig which had been very popular among Azerbaijani population. The Russian economic crisis precipitated the country's inability to finance its information system. As a result, two of the Russian information agencies, RIA Novosti and Russia Today were merged. This development in turn affected Azerbaijan information subsidiary structure as it was shut down and replaced by a branch of 'Russia Today'.

The combined information system of Russia and Azerbaijan apparently projects the interest of the countries. Equality in the coverage of their interest is lacking because the information content is basically formed on Russian interests. Russia used the media more to its advantage by representing its view as expressions of both countries to criticize Western democracy and their ambition of dominating global affairs. The media space is used to convince the societies of their special paths in terms of development, national interests, national ideologies and religious features as opposed to the alleged Western moral and spiritual corruption. The media outlets concentrate mainly on projecting Russia's viewpoints on foreign policy while they ignored Azerbaijan internal political challenges. The media outlets are monopolized to promote Russian image but blocked the featuring of political oppositions and

[3] Open democracy organization and the Freedom House have released several reports on the crackdown of democracy in Azerbaijan, centralization of power and dynasty of Aliyev's family in Azerbaijan, suppression of political opponents, repression of media freedom among other things. Some of the reports include, A. Goyushov, 2015: The crackdown in Azerbaijan. https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/altay-goyushov/crackdown-in-azerbaijan , S.Freizer, 2003: Dynasty and democracy in Azerbaijan, https://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-protest/article_1626.jsp and World report on human rights in Azerbaijan, 2017, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/azerbaijan.

independent civil society activities. Russian information politics main goal is to checkmate the perceived attempts by the West in expanding its influence on Azerbaijan and evade the spread of western value alongside its democratic and liberal tenets.

Since 2012, Russia has intensified its influence on Azerbaijan using Russian language, education, and information as tools of pressure. There has been an increase in numbers of education, different exchange programs and investment in Russian media as tool to promote Russian world views. Russian information as exemplified in Azerbaijan case has been to strengthen Russia against oppositions which may undermine the Eurasian union project. As online media increases in the 2000s, Russian language publication increases to downgrade Azerbaijani language which had been used as its primary broadcasting language. For the wide coverage of Russian language across the post-Soviet space, the Azerbaijani authorities also has found no option than supporting the increase of number of Russian language outlets so as to enable the dissemination of Azerbaijani agenda across the post-soviet space where the language is widely spoken and understood.

Before the shift of strategy to control Azerbaijani affairs via media, the territorial conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia has been used as a tool to inflict political pressures on Azerbaijan. Thus, Azerbaijan concession to Russian media domination is primarily purposed to strengthen its position in the information warfare against Armenia in respect of the conflict. This compromise in the actual sense undermined Azerbaijani media, while their journalists are reduced to transmitters of Russia information they received from Russian language sources. The Azerbaijani media dependence in essence, created another channel through which Russian propaganda or manipulated information found its way into Azerbaijani information space. Though, Russian channels are not targeted against Azerbaijan politics, Russia had the opportunity to use Azerbaijan anti-Western disposition since 2013 to promote its own anti-European Union and anti-American agenda by depicting their responses to Ukraine conflict as interference in internal affairs.

Based on the Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia conflict which is parallel with Ukraine-Crimean conflict, Azerbaijan stance on the latter situation was vertical to Russian position. Nonetheless, Russia disinformation could not be prevented from having a sway on Azerbaijan population. Russian based media has emerged as the popular source of information and has been used to spread Russian side of stories on the Ukraine's crisis and the make-belief that the conflict was sponsored by the West and America. Russian shift in strategy from using Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to mount pressure on Azerbaijan to information warfare was the negligible impact that the former strategy had on the country. Azerbaijan has been able to resist Russian influence in these areas because of the advantage of economic independence with which it was able to protect its political autonomy. Starting from 2012, when Russian media tools and organization were established, Russian media has been yielding better result in exerting its influence in Azerbaijan and across the other post-Soviet regions. Russia was able to manipulate information in Azerbaijan information space partly due to higher quality of media and its media became the alternative because of the Russian language that is widely spoken.

Russia current goal goes beyond the revival of its historical imperial system or imposition of authoritarianism as many ideas might suggest. Undoubtedly, Russia scrambled with major powers over the control of bordering territories such as Poland, Finland, Caucasus etc., in the nineteenth and twentieth, and the concept of territorial control has always defined the formation of its foreign policies. The spheres which formed boundaries between the imperialist rivals were important to Russia, because they serve as protective and strategic areas for advancing influence and security (Trenin, 2009, 6). Its ambition however, has been to be one of the few powers, to reckon with in the global system as a key player and to reduce the chances of penetration of U.S/Western-centric system. This idea of curtailing the infiltration of western ways will automatically include the penetration of the western democracy into Russian spheres of influence.

Russian logic to use political issue of Nagorno-Karabakh as instrument of influence is speculated because its intervention as an arbitrator between the conflict parties. Russian indeed had prevented more violence in the war, but its plan as to regulate internal politics was made evident by its actions not to give the crisis conclusive solution on the disputed territory between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The political atmosphere maintained by Russia in Nagorno-Karabakh, especially for its alliance with Armenia allowed it to maintain its military presence in Armenia as a measure of protection against the Western European powers.

Republic of Belarus

Among the three East Slavic tribes that subsisted as republics of the Soviet Union, Belarus was the smallest following Russia and Ukraine. It was one of the Soviet republics that declared its national sovereignty in 1990 after which it was renamed Republic of Belarus in 1991. The country is located in the eastern part of European continent, bordered by Poland to the west, Lithuania to the north-west, Latvia to the north-east, Russia to the east and to the south Ukraine.

Belarus maintains close relationship and alliance with Russia, and the relationship constitutes a major obstacle for change in the Belarusian political regime. The Belarusian President, Lukashenka, on his becoming the president enhanced the country's relationship with Russia by signing several bilateral treaties which include military cooperation, joint regional security and unification. Russia and Belarus also signed an agreement on the program of economic cooperation in 1999 and which was to continue for the next ten years.

Belarusian close relationship was further invigorated with the Belarusian adoption of Russian as the Belarusian official language as was decided by a referendum in 1995. The decision of the Belarusian vast majority in the 1995 referendum to return to the independent republic of Belarus was of no substantial significance that differentiated them from Soviet Belarus. In essence, the independent republic of Belarus reflects the harmonization of two regimes - the Belarusian independent State along with the Soviet

identity. The Belarusian State symbols, that is, the coat of arm and the flag were designed in the strict semblance to the Soviet state symbols. The historical bond between Russia and Belarus was evidently demonstrated with their replication of Soviet symbols. This conscious action was meant to ingrain in the Belarusian memories of the victorious past of Belarus as a conglomerate or part of the Soviet Union. Belarusian government's nostalgia for Soviet and their patriotic feeling was objectified to prevent tendency of future rise of nationalism in the country, and in particular, to erode the nationalism feeling that had been motivated among the people in 1991. Belarusian de facto re-integration with Russia immensely influenced its anti-Western relations and its apathy for anti-Russian policy.

Russia's economic and welfare incentives to Belarus also formed a strong bond that consolidated the relation between the two countries. Belarus enjoys loans, grants, discounted oil and gas supplies without which the Belarusians economic (with its level of dependency on Russia) may suffer stable economy. With Russian assistance, the Belarusians president had a leverage that helps in creating a stable atmosphere, stable growth of pension and salaries of workers in the state industry.

Belarus is described as not being on track to becoming a fair and free democracy. The country scored low in the rating of the "Freedom House" in 2017 with its democracy level at 3.13/10 which put it in the categories of authoritarian governments. Poor democratic orientation of Belarus could not be disconnected with the history of occupation and partition of Belarus by WWI warring parties. Belarus had lived as an independent country during the German occupation in WWI and lasted shortly until it was re-occupied by Russia and invaded by Poland after the war. So, the history of its oppression and domination by foreign powers combined with its post-Soviet poor economic state to some degree were responsible for their failure in establishing the true democracy.

Prior to the WWI, Belarus lived under the hegemony and Russification by Russian, starting from the last decade of the eighteenth century. Partitioned Belarus experienced nationalistic ideas from both the USSR and Poland resulting in its people having only slim opportunities to strengthen tier national identity. The reoccupation of USSR which ended the divided Belarus could not bring the feeling of togetherness that democracy required to prosper in the country.

Although Belarus embarked on democratisation of the country through electoral processes, the practical situation in reference to governance makes it evident that it is still far from democracy. Apart from President Lukashenka being accused by foreign observers of altering election vote, democratic values like freedom of the press, religious freedom have been excised from their democratic system (Freedom House). Constitutionally, Belarus is a democratic social state that entrenches political rights, civil freedom and separation of powers among its political institutions. In the reality, the president assured the monopoly of powers as he combines both the executive with part of the legislative power. The president Alexander Lukashenko became instrumental in changing the document in 1996 and 2004 making it possible to demean the principle of separation of powers. Immediately after the independence of the country from the collapse of the USSR, it embarked on transformation project of building a democratic regime that will replace the USSR legacies of authoritarianism. Unfortunately, this attempt resulted in political and economic instability leaving the government of the country of no other option than making the regime stability its priority project at the expense of political reform. Democratic values of civic rights including the freedom of the press, speech, association, and franchise among others became trivialized by the majority of Belarusian who strongly craved for economic, social and political stability instead of democracy.

Belarus became more undemocratic since the election of Lukashenka in 1994, while he used the advantage of his ability to, at least, sustain the economy of Belarus as pretense for dictatorship. The president has subsequently remained popular for his Messianic rescue by providing acceptable standard of living, employment to the population and consolidation of all branches of power under his government. In the Belarusian referendum of 1996, the result showed that about eighty percent of the participant favoured authoritarian president against the key elements of democratic state which included the legislature and directly elected local executives. By 1997, electoral processes were overruled and the president became more powerful that he directly appointed legislative and judicial officials. In 2004, another referendum was organized on the proposal of president Lukashenka for unlimited number of president terms a president can serve.

The referendum exterminated limits of presidential term with about eighty percent of Belarusian mandates in its favour. Lukashenka used this mechanism as a legal backing to serve as president indefinitely running presidential campaigns and winning elections since 1994. Belarus has reverted to the Soviet model of governance under a president that dominate all branches of government. The legislature and judiciary are stripped of their power while the president maintains absolute control over them. The public agencies and organizations that could influence public opinions were not exempted from the president arbitrariness. For instance, the First private FM station in Belarus was sometime stopped from transmitting while all other domestic radio and television stations were taken over by his government to promote himself against 2001 election. In 2005, the regime blocked the proliferation of the NGOs that advocated democracy, prevented the rise of opposition movements and by 2006 repressed independent newspapers. Autocratic model of administration in Belarus remained unchecked as a result of the lack of civic culture of political participation which was inherited from the Soviet rule (Hurynovich, 2011, 9).

In the economic aspect, Belarus is an economic struggling country that is largely economically dependent especially on Russia's subsidies and raw materials. The E.U. appreciated economic stability as a non-optional prerequisite for any democratic or prospective democratic country to operate an ideal democracy. Thus, the EaP countries that are economically unstable were granted only normative integration into the E.U due to weak economy that is incapable of supporting true democracy.

Republic of Moldova

Moldova is situated in the Eastern Europe sharing borders with Romania to the west and Ukraine to the north, east and south, and one of the former soviet republics. Fundamental democratic values like human rights and freedoms are constitutionally guaranteed by the government which was made up of several small regions that integrated since the sixteenth century enjoyed political freedom through the end of the WWI. The Soviet Union changed the administrative authorities after its annexation in 1940 and made a population transfer when it moved ethnic Russian into Moldova and expelled the ethnic Romans. Though Moldova declared independence in 1991, its mixed identity and weak economy contributed crucial constraint to its democratic ideal.

Moldova is of significant importance to Russia, not for its size which is very small with the population of only about three million people but it's location between Romania and Ukraine in the Eastern periphery of Europe constitutes a strategic importance to Russia in terms of security. Moldovan has been used by great power as an invasion route by Russia, Balkans and European powers. It has repeatedly been switched between Romania and Russia between nineteenth and twentieth century. Moldova has a close proximity to Ukrainian port of Odessa and Crimean Peninsula, the Russian Black Sea Fleet. It also serves as oil and gas transit between Russia, Europe and Turkey and has always been known as a buffer zone between Russia and European powers. Both economic and security are one of the priority areas of importance in Russian foreign policies.

Revitalisation of relationship with Russia became the main focus of Vladimir Voronim, a former president of Moldova (known for his allegiance to Communism), on assumption of office as the president of Moldova. Vladimir Voronim reinvigorated the legacy of the Soviet era with the enactment of the language statute, the concept of national policy and adoption of Soviet-like identity for the Moldovans in respect to the republican status of the country. The loyalty of the Moldovan president to Russian instilled in the Moldovan people, the impression that no other country could be a better ally than Russia. Voronim commitment to promoting Russian dominates greater part of its national affairs. However, Vladimir Voronin once declared a foreign policy that expressed his intention to build closer relationship with the E.U.

Meanwhile, one of Russian intentions in its policy towards Moldova has also been to determine the scope of the country's relationship with the Western Europe, particularly, in the areas of security. Thus, Russia employs the tactics to ensure that Moldova build no relationship with NATO, to prevent its integration with the E.U and to create a political balance between Moldova state and the pro-Russian Transnistrian region of the state. Voronin's declaration unfortunately triggered an unfriendly reaction from Russia culminating in the latter exerting further control over them by using its energy resources as instrument of suppression against Moldovan intention.

Russia used the economic status of Moldova as a trump card to subject it to its whim and caprices as the country remains one of the poorest countries of the Eastern partners, which totally depends on Russia for its energy supplies. In 2006, Russia had deliberately hiked the price of its gas supply with the intent to mount further economic pressure on Moldova with the hope that they would have no alternative but redirect their step towards rebuilding more cordial relations with Russia. Russia also complicated situations for Moldova by requesting that one of its upstream energy company, Gazprom takes a larger majority stake in Moldovagas (a Moldovan gas sector), and so inflicting more control over its energy infrastructure. Furthermore, there were other economic sanctions from Russia in 2006 aimed at putting the economy of Moldova under greater pressure.

The attempt by the Republic of Moldova in 2013 to sign Association and Free Trade Agreement with the EU triggered Russian unfriendly reactions that revised the Moldovan economy activities downwardly. Russian controlled economy in Transnistra being the largest portion of the region economy indirectly forms the considerable part of Moldovan economy. This situation for Moldovan is exacerbated by its complete dependence on Russian gas and partial dependence on Russian oil and electricity. The politics, economic and military supports from Russia to Transnistra are more than ordinary but to hamstring the Moldovan government into Russia's biddings.

Russia had a new hedge over Moldovan with the collapse of the 2003 Kozak memorandum wherein conditions for the resolution of Moldova-Transnistran conflict was set. Kozak memorandum proposed a united asymmetric federal Moldovan state with a key proposal to locate a Russian military base in Moldovan territory for the next 20 years beginning from 2003.

In 2005, Russia, in their reaction to Moldovan refusal of Russian bargains for resolution, came up with a new economic policy against Moldova. In 2005, Russia banned imports of Moldovan agricultural products to the Russian market. In 2006, Moldovan wines which forms one of its viable source of revenue was banned from being imported into the Russian market. The gas price for Moldovan was hiked by Russia to complicate the situation for the country. All these measures were aimed at sending warnings of sinister dangers that Moldovan divergence from Russian interest may spark. Moldova was forced as a result of the hardship imposed by Russia via the economic sanctions to concede the conditions for conflict resolution as demanded by Russia in the 2003 Kozak memorandum only with an exception of accepting Russian military occupation in the reunited Moldova.

Russia placed embargo on export of some Moldovan products so as to protect infiltration of European products that might come through Moldova into the Russian market. Russian justified the reason for the embargo under the excuse under the excuse that Moldovan products do not comply with Russian quality specifications. Apart from wine, which constitutes major source of Moldovan revenue which was banned from importation for the second time in 2013, the previous ban being in 2006, in April 2014, Russian embargo was placed by the Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Supervision of the Russian Federation, on the import of processed meat for Moldova for alleged non-compliance with the Custom Union norms, and in the same year, the Rospotrebnadzov (the Russian Sanitary Service) interdicted the import of canned fruits and vegetables alleged Moldovan violation of Russian legislation on consumers' rights protection.

The frozen conflict between the Moldovan Federation and its Transnistrian region with separatist government became another major political challenge for the republic. Transnistria holds the population of the pro-Russian separatists that have the backings of Moscow to establish a de facto government that control the Transnistrian region of Moldova. This resulted in the fragmentation of the country, culminating in the de-stability of its political standing. Russia under the pretext of the right to protect its minority population in Moldova as in the case of any other republics of the former Soviet Union has been maintaining its troops in Moldova, and thus constituting threats to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the republic.

According to the Freedom House, Moldova regarded as one of the former Soviet republics that operate pseudo-democratic system. In paper, Moldova is a democratic government but practically totalitarian in nature. The country has organized democratic election since 1994 when it had the first legislative election into the parliament. Moldova was adjudged to be consistent in terms of development of democratic freedoms than any other post-Soviet succession states apart from the Baltic republics. Nonetheless the acclaimed democratic orientation by the Moldovan government is a misnomer as the mode of public administration is autocratic in nature. For much period after the country stopped references to socialism and Soviet but declared Moldova as a republic, it was still governed by an elected communist government uniquely among the other post-Soviet states.

There are evidences of heavy government corruption, repression of media freedom, non-recognition of religious group and harsh discrimination against the Roma minorities by Moldovan government, physical and psychological persecution of individuals and organizations by the authorities in Moldova. The assumption of a communist party of power in 2001 in Moldova negatively influenced the functioning of democratic consolidation though the process of democratic consolidation was not halted. The effectiveness of democracy has also been hampered by some Soviet military and secret police figures from all over the former S.U who dominantly influenced government authorities and media.

Moldovan built more confidence in Russian Medias as they became seemingly the only reliable sources of information for the advantage of wider coverage they have than Moldovan government media. According to the research by "NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence", Russian media appeared to be the most trusted news source among the Moldovan and are more confident in Russian Television channels where most information about E.U is disseminated to them. The Moldovan subscription for Russian media became prevalent as large audience consults its media on daily basis because the like the content (Sillanpa et al, 2017, 35-49). Moldovan government inability, or rather its willful support for Russian domination of its media space largely effaced the options of information sources accessible to the republic. This stream was used by Russia to carry propaganda that influences Moldovan views against the E.U, and about Russia as the true ally.

Historically, the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on Russian politics has been very significant. Notwithstanding the secularity of the Russian state and the detachment of its Orthodox Church from politics, Russian Orthodox Church still impacts some influences on its politics and on the countries where Russian regards as its area of control. The Russian Orthodox Church became the most influential institution because of people's belief in the integrity of the religious institution. The patriarchal opinion about the government administration and its policies are much respected for the belief that such opinions are apolitical but God-inspired.

So, the Orthodox Church influences could gain a foothold in Moldova as its Orthodox Church remains answerable to the Patriarch of Moscow, and the Orthodox domination of other religious denomination enhances that opportunity. In addition to the fact that Moldova forms a part of Russian sphere of influence, it is one of the CIS countries that constitute buffer zones against NATO. The strategic position of Moldova to Russia sparked Russian interest as to keep control and integrate the country as part of the CIS to consolidate its security network. Despite the wide spectrum of Moldovan people in favour of the countries membership in the E.U, Moldovan government undermines need for democratic reforms in the state.

Russia covertly employed the territorial conflict between Moldova and Transdniestrian region as a tool to maintain its control over Moldova. Russia has been supporting the Transdniestran region against the Moldovan government to disrupt its political stability knowing well that instability in Moldova would stifle its chances of becoming a member of the E.U. The conditions offered by Russia for the resolution of the frozen conflict appeared to be a moral tactic to re-impose Russian control over the state. Russia has demanded the concession of substantial right to Transnistra parliamentarian at the Moldovan Federal level, respect of Russian property in Transnistria, preference for Russian language and lasting seclusion from military alliance outside the Eurasian circle or CIS. The Moldovan military dependence on Russia is a step backward for Moldova to independently enforce any national policy that intersects Russian interests in the region.

No matter how much concession Moldovan government has offered, the exemption clause could not in any way satisfy Russia whose goal has always been to secure regional influence to checkmate the NATO expansionism. Russia sees the E.U as an organization who relates with its sphere of influence under the coverage of political and economic interests. To Russia, E.U is more than what they claim to be but more of a potential military alliance that will erode Russian relevance in the Eastern and the South Caucasus regions. Though Russia has warned that Moldova's E.U's integration will contradict its neutrality, Moldovan actions could only be checked by Russian military presence in Transnistria.

The CIS has also been used as a tool for Russia to control its members including Moldova. Moldova has been a member of the CIS since 1991. CIS is the Russian-led confederation of states composed of some member countries of the Soviet Republics in many areas of national interests. The foreign and security policy of the organization had been tactically dominated by the Russian President Putin, and has also proposed the acceptance of this order as a price for resolving the Moldovan territorial conflict. This also constituted difficulty for Moldova to escape Russian subjugation. The main goal of Russian interest in Moldova is to subject the state to dependence on Russia and to control its infrastructure, economic spaces, strategic communication and banking (Kaljurand, 2008, 3*)*.

Georgian Republic

Georgia is a transcaucasian country located at the crossroad of western Asia and Eastern Europe. The country was a part of Russia Empire from 1801 up till 1918 when it became independent of Russian Empire following the Russian revolution of 1917. Georgia has maintained a history of democracy even before its integration which came as a result of Russian revolution. Even after the Russia revolution, Georgia sustained an independent state under parliamentary system that was secured through electoral processes and the status it maintained until 1921 when the country was invaded by Russia. Georgia emerged as one of the first FSR after the soviet dissolution that sought independence and established democracy.

Though Georgia has shown great deal in establishing a democratic government, it remained unstable as a result of mounting factional pressures until 2002 when a stable government was achieved through election. Its democratic tradition was notably distorted by unrest and conflicts that intermittently ravaged the region. Nevertheless, Georgia's genuineness for democracy has been exhibited through various successful elections that have been held in the country.

As a semi-presidential representative government, the country elects the head of state, the president and the legislatives at national level, under multi-party system. It held its first democratic election in 1990, Georgian parliamentary election in 2012, presidential and legislative election in 2008, presidential election in 2004 and parliamentary election in 2008. With Georgian understanding of democracy as a principle that means beyond the democratic institutions, the country adopted the 1995 constitution in the direction of developing modern statehood in the context of democracy, rule of law and protection of human rights. The Georgian constitution of 1921 also had been directed towards achieving a unified, democratic independent state but unfortunately was suspended by Russia following its occupation of Georgia.

An author remarked that in spite of the fact that Georgia had no independent legally supported constitution under Russia's occupation, coupled with the long experience of subjection under the tsarist regime of the Russia empire, authors of the 1921 constitution created a legal document that was unique among the post-world war I constitutions. The constitution could be regarded as one of the best legislative acts of its time to advocate democracy, liberty, the security of human rights and rule of law seemingly in tandem with the modern democratic principles. Georgia's 1918 republican act declared it as a democratic republic. Georgian parliament adopted a new constitution for post-Soviet Georgian state in 1995. The preamble of the constitution which referenced the many centuries old tradition of the Georgian statehood and the 1921 constitution depicted the reincarnation of its historical legacy of democracy. The constitution also accounted for fundamental principles of human rights, form of governance, state organization and several issue of democratic values.

Notwithstanding the Georgian rating in terms of political democracy at an average level, and in its efforts towards developing democratic state of modern standard, the country has its shortfall in achieving a utopian democratic status. According to the ratings from the Freedom house of 2018, people political choices are not free from domination by the ruling political party- Georgian Dream Party, and the Georgian political life is influenced by influential individuals. La Porte's assessment of Georgian democracy level within 1995 to 2003 determined that Georgian government reacted randomly and intermittently against its opposition including the journalists and opposition parties by humiliating them both in private and through the media. Georgian elites in office are found also to be corrupt with bribery from the masses (Votey, 2012*).*

Tamar Chugoshvili, a chairman of the Georgian Young Lawyers association who identified the weak area of democracy affirmed the failure of the Georgian authorities in building a democratic system that could protect human rights. She alleged of the government lack of political will to investigate arrays of illegal treatments of Georgian people, and concentration of power in the executive branch of government that monopolizes all the government decisions and allowing not for checks and balances (Lally, 2012, *5-6).* Though the World Bank credited Georgian for harnessing democratic value to an extent in the areas of combating day-to-day corruption, reformation of the police and making government services citizen-oriented, they challenged the authorities for dominance and failure to allow for political competition (Lally, 2012).

Regional Implications of Russian Influence On Eastern Partnership Countries

The efforts of Georgia since its pre-soviet period in building an exemplary democratic state in the Southern Caucasus were pervasive. Like it is presently, Russia's reaction to Georgia democratic government had been a continual efforts from its post-Russian empire era to repress the Georgian achievement of democratic state. Between 1918 and 1920, Russia made several attempts to cause internal disorder and ethnic conflicts in some regions in Georgia that are populated with Russian ethnics such as Abkhaz and Tshninvali but was not successful. As in the other EaP countries, independent Georgia lived not more than three years (1918-1921) as an independent regime when they were taken over by the Bolsheviks.

Georgia like other former Soviet members has not been lucky enough to be excluded from Russian wield of influences even with the Soviet relations that had become frozen with the 2008 Russo-Georgian. As relationship between them deteriorated since the war, Georgia has been subjected to Russian surveillance by maintaining its military presence in south Ossetia and Abkhazia, the two regions that declared independence from Georgia and recognized by Russia. This comes as one of the ways by which Russia uses its soft power tactic in undermining Georgian political independence. Among many other ways Russian promotes its interest in Georgia is the development of Eurosceptic political parties that associate with Russia. Russia used the political issue of conflicts in Georgia as in other target countries to run propaganda that seeks to undermine the credibility of the west and its democracy at international level.

Apart from the Abkhazia and South Ossetia that pose political insecurity in Georgia, Adjara constitutes another potential threat which can comfortably be used as access point for Russian influence in Georgia. Russia has reiterated its notion of special path wherein it described itself as a sacred society as opposed to moral degradation inherent in the West. Its image promotion combined with Putin's image as a bravest and strongest leader capable to curtail Western infiltration into Eastern region also found its way into Georgia while Georgia's population began to perceive Putin as a defender of Georgian tradition and culture from external threats. Russia laid emphasis on historical, mutual, cultural and religious bond that tied them together.

The influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church cannot be overlooked. The Georgian Orthodox Church remains one of the most influential institutions that is trusted by the majority of Georgian population as a non-political and sacred institution that its involvement in political issue is limited to mediation in the case of political confrontations. Against the belief of the majority, the Church extracts its strength of influence from people's trust and every government uses it as a source of legitimacy. Thus, the Orthodox Church became de facto state religion, serving as a nexus between the masses and the government.

The religious relation between Russia and Georgia created in them the impression that overall relationship between them has not been totally broken. The religion content that still exists between them in spiritual context retains the communication and the hope of possibility to later come back to mutual understanding. Besides, the patriarchs of the two countries can always overlook or forgive each other's antics. In spite of that, the political situation in Georgia is somehow influenced by the Russian Orthodox Church.

Abkazhian priests who were trained in Russian Orthodox institution are demanding that the Abkazhian Orthodox be independent that is, not internationally recognized. A Russian Othodox Church Partriach Kiril however had once declared that Abkazhian Orthodox Church is recognized as canonical territory of Georgian Orthodox Church.

These situations of political and religious nuances created a dilemma to understand the reality of Russian-Georgian relations. In essence, the religious attachment between Russian Orthodox Church and Georgian Orthodox Church is an open door for the two countries to promote their national interests. The Russian Patriarch's position of Abkazhian Orthodox status is apparently a conscientious effort to sustain the bond between the Russian-backed Abkazhia and Georgia. At the same level, the Georgian Patriarch hopes for a unified Georgia using religion platform as a tool. The Georgian minorities in Georgia- the Adjarian and Javakhatis are potentials gateways to Russian to manipulate political stance in Georgia.

Adjara was annexed by Russia in the nineteenth century but incorporated into Georgia following the Bolshevik revolution as autonomous republic within the USSR. The dissent between Georgian Adjara and the central government of Georgia suggest that Russia has chances of employing the tense relation between them as an effective tool to maneuver its interest into Georgian space.

The similar situations have occurred in Georgia where Abkazhia and South Ossetian have been used as tools of manipulations while the same trend that occurred in Donetsk and Luhansk regions in Donbas in Eastern Ukraine promotes Russian interests in the country, and Javakhati where Armenian formed the ethnic majority. Adjara is a politically divided republic of Georgia after the S.U dissolution, and the reintegration of the autonomous region into Georgia after Rose revolution challenged the autonomy of the region and precipitated crisis with the center.

Republic of Ukraine

The Russian military operation which started in 2022 is a renaissance of the century-long history of Russian political grandeur in the Eastern Europe.

The Republic of Ukraine, in an attempt to salvage and build its post-Soviet independent economy, embarked on a pro-western policy by attempting signing European Partnership Agreement. The anticipated success of the agreement would imply the inclusion of Ukraine into the membership of European Union and the likelihood of membership in NATO. The European Union-Ukraine partnership project was intercepted by Russian Federation and brought to a halt with Russian annexation of Crimea, an autonomous Republic that officially regarded as part of the Republic of Ukraine, in 2014.

Judging from international views, the action of Russia towards Ukraine was seen as unwarranted interference and a sheer violation of the principle of sovereign right. But then, making a conclusion on the excesses of Russia towards Ukraine will be a superficial unbalanced judgment. Further scrutiny into elements that warranted such activity will show that such action was unavoidable. Well, apart from the iron cord that historically bound Russia and Ukraine together, there has been an interplay between two major elements that have their bearing on Russian actions namely, the national and foreign interest. It is worth noting that what determines the foreign policy of any country is engendered by its domestic policy, otherwise described as its national interest.

In order to return order in Russian self-image both at national and international level, the country has embarked on finding a level ground in its relationship with the former Soviet republics as a regional actor, the magnanimity of Russia's economic fall following the S.U. dissolution and the need to recover it also influenced Russia's direction on its regional policy.

A sensitive policy prescription towards the former Soviet republics is the aspect of Russian ethnic protection. Protection rights have always been used as a tool in the hand of Russian government to achieve national interest. In Georgia, Chechnya, Ukraine etc., Russia had clamped down on nationalist movements under the auspices to protect the Russian world against hostile regimes. An ex-Soviet academic, Ambartsumanov had asserted that Russia's geopolitical interest must be seen beyond the Russian Federation geopolitical delineation. In essence, Russia's relationship with the ceded Soviet republics became the smokescreen for the defense of national interest espousing the defense of the right of the ethnic Russian abroad. This assertion is inspired by Russia's tradition of defending their people's rights which form a top priority in its foreign policy justifying its war on Ukraine. In Ukraine, according to State Statistic Committee of Ukraine, in the All-Ukrainian population census data 2001, the last census in Crimea as part of Ukrainian nationwide census, Russians constituted the majority of its population based on nationality and language with fifty eight overwhelming population, Ukrainian twenty four percent and the Crimean Tatars twelve percent. The figure of Russian population in Crimea which reflected that they formed the overwhelming population in Crimea was a good basis for its intervention when the people's lives are under security threat. Defense and protection of even the Russian minorities in the former USSR republic takes a key role in Russian regional policy.

CONCLUSION

The dissolution of the Soviet Union has changed the dynamics of Russian relations with the former Soviet republics that emerged as independent states. The consummation of the union states and the new relationships that emerged between them are bound to have serious effects on Russia's domestic politics, strategic orientation, and geopolitical identity. Russia's status in the Soviet Union went clearly beyond its official recognition as a republic among its equal peers; it assumed a dominant position that represented the prestigious identity of the Soviet Union axe-head of a polar world. This position became obsolete with the emergence of new states, each carrying its own personality identity. As one of the countries that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been pressured with a new challenge of maintaining a position that would conserve its old power status not only in regards to both its internal and international strategic positions but also its regional influence. Thus, a vision of achieving national interests by keeping a place in the international system in replacement of the S.U. became priority pursuit. It is not enough that Russian Federation succeeded in retaining its global position on the United Nation Security Council's (UNSC) platform, its relevance and importance in that system would however be determined by its regional influence. It is worth noting that "Russia's geopolitical interests are multidimensional…but all could only be achieved in a secured environment that is void of external threats to its national security. So, to guarantee both the Russian border protection and geopolitical relevance, either soft power or enforcement approach to secure the cooperation of the neighbouring states is compelled" (Taiwo & Ademuyiwa, 2025, 2).

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