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CIS Countries Learn to Play Off EU and Russia

By Konstantin Simonov

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Two opposing camps determine Russia's policy in the former Soviet republics. The first camp advocates the use of soft power and argues against forming purely pragmatic relations, especially with Slavic countries. The main principle is that Russia shares a common blood and fate with these countries and that there is nothing wrong with paying a little extra to maintain those ties. The second camp asserts that economic handouts only corrupt Russia's partners while failing to address political goals. This is especially true concerning Ukraine. When Viktor Yanukovych won the presidential election there, Moscow leaders were raising their champagne glasses in jubilation. Now, in the run-up to the EU's Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius, they are more likely to be drinking Valium.

President Vladimir Putin seems to be trying to take a pragmatic course. Moscow has been shifting discussions of energy shipments to regional neighbors onto a more commercial track. However, Russia sometimes lapses back into the approach of buying loyalty with deep energy subsidies — especially when a country like Ukraine puts Moscow into a panic over talk

of integrating with Europe. Russia's limited influence in the region was made clear by the arrest of Uralkali CEO Vladislav Baumgertner in Minsk.

Some former Soviet republics long ago learned the art of negotiating advantageous deals with the EU and Russia. For example, Azerbaijan made a joke of the entire EU energy policy when, in violation of norms of the Third Energy Package, it was allowed to buy a Greek gas transmission company. And this says nothing of the fact that the gas will be shipped not to Eastern Europe, where Russian gas plays a major role, but to Italy, which is already one of the most highly diversified energy importers in Europe. With those supply lines in place, Azerbaijan will begin putting out political feelers in European capitals regarding the topic of its disputed Karabakh region.

Both Russia and Europe were caught unaware as China quietly became the dominant force in Central Asia — without resorting to soft power or any particular ideology — by cynically approaching the former Soviet republics as nothing but colonial sources of raw materials. To add a little kick to that already bitter pill, China has shown interest in Belarussian companies and is rumored to have negotiated a long-term rental agreement for 5 percent of Ukraine's territory to grow crops. Maybe Russia has been studying under the wrong teacher.

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