

Putin's Illiberal Empire As Model to Lead CIS

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Almost 20 years ago, Anatoly Chubais, who was then head of the country's voucher-privatization program, penned an important foreign policy essay, offering a compelling vision for Russia's role in the post-Soviet space. He argued that Russia's mission was to integrate the former Soviet republics into a "liberal empire" where Russia would lead by example as a beacon of democracy, freedom, rule of law, competitive economy and vibrant culture. He was much criticized for his chauvinism, while his vision failed to materialize even in Russia.

Since the early 1990s, the European Union has played the role of the liberal empire for most of Eastern Europe, forcing painful economic and political reforms on countries aspiring to EU membership. The allure of admission to the world's club of democracies seemed overwhelming.

Yet in the post-Soviet space, the EU's liberal empire has fumbled. While the Baltic states were

offered membership, others were invited to share EU's standards in noncommittal partnerships. Most former Soviet states showed little interest in binding bonds with the EU. The liberal empire has reached its limits where it drew the line over membership, while creating a skewed balance between carrots and sticks in "partnerships on the cheap."

Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia has come up with an alternative model for post-Soviet integration. It was more appealing to the region's leaders, if not their citizens, and could be described as the "illiberal empire."

At its heart is the notion of the unconditional sovereignty of a strong ruler who fully controls the country's resources and state assets. Only the ruler knows what is best for his nation, while people cannot be trusted to freely choose their leaders in fair elections. For a small trade-off in authority over foreign trade, post-Soviet leaders get the Kremlin's political protection, financial aid and cheap energy to stave off challenges to their rule.

The illiberal empire gives Moscow the self-delusional sense of being a superpower that competes with the EU, China and the U.S., regardless of the cost, the disparity in size and lackluster appeal. It helps legitimize Russia's drift away from Europe and also helps the Kremlin attack "subversive" European values that threaten rulers' monopoly on power.

The two empires have now clashed over Ukraine, where the people have asserted their right to determine the country's future. The state of play? Incomplete.

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