



## Growing Apart: The Impact of the Russian War in Ukraine on the Former Soviet Space

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**Abstract:** The full-scale war launched by the Russian Federation against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, began under a false assumption regarding the underlying grand strategy. The ongoing conflict has presented difficult choices for the states in the former Soviet Union, who have approached it with a mix of rational calculation and emotional considerations, viewing it as a conflict between two once brotherly nations. While Russia continues to wield significant influence, and some states depend on it as a security guarantor, the general consensus among the ten states is that Russia's power and influence are waning. Consequently, they anticipate that Russia will pay less attention to its regional partners, allocate fewer resources to them, and that close association with Russia would strain relations with other important actors, particularly in the West. Russia's influence has led seven of the ten states to not fully align with either the West or Moscow. While multilateral cooperation through organizations like the CSTO and EAEU was not paramount due to the prevailing "hub and spoke" structure, these states now face a noticeable stalemate. Despite Russia's lingering influence, fueled in part by economic disparities, a rapid "growing apart" occurs in the area of the former Soviet Union. Some actors are distancing and disengaging faster than ever, leading to a shifting geopolitical landscape.

**Keywords:** Disintegration, Russia, Ukraine, Russia-Ukraine war, states of the former Soviet Union.

*Russia is never as strong as she looks; Russia is never as weak as she looks.*

Winston Churchill <sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Wars regularly change the course of history and often mark the beginning of new eras. When Vladimir Putin, in his capacity as the President of Russia, decided to launch a war on Ukraine, he likely did not anticipate the full extent of the consequences that would ensue. He was under the impression that the hostilities would not entail a long, high-intensity fight rather than collisions of a few days, something maybe just “a little worse” than what happened in Crimea in 2014. This decision was based on an unfounded grand strategy that hence could not be backed by an adequate military strategy. Thus, the military had to catch up with the developments, and it took significant time to devise viable strategies. Nearly two years after the outbreak of the war, it is clear that the underlying assumption was fundamentally unfounded. We are likely facing a war of attrition in which massive resources of the two countries and those supporting them are employed. Given the asymmetrical size and power of the two parties involved, external support becomes even more essential for the side possessing more limited resources. Both parties depend on external assistance, with Ukraine receiving support from the collective political West, while Russia relies on a few states, including Iran, North Korea, and possibly China. This helps to mitigate the imbalance between the two sides but creates an asymmetrical external dependency. Russia anticipates that support for Ukraine from external sources will diminish over time, eventually leading to its victory in the conflict. Conversely, Ukraine hopes its successful resistance will trigger ripple effects in Russian domestic politics, weakening the Putin regime and ultimately leading to its own victory.

Moscow’s original expectation of breaking Ukraine’s resistance and installing a puppet regime loyal to Russia apparently failed. However, Russia’s reduced expectation of occupying a large portion of Eastern and Southeastern Ukraine was realized. Following the annexation of Crimea (including Sevastopol) in 2014, Russia declared the annexation of another four *oblasts* of Ukraine in September 2022: Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhiiia, totaling 135,861 square kilometers. This represents approximately 22.5% of Ukraine’s territory. Out of Ukraine’s total population of 44.4 million (including Crimea and all other territories annexed in 2022), 10.95 million lived in these five territorial entities, representing 24.8% of the population.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Russia’s actions, from attempting to eliminate Ukraine’s political independence to violating its territorial integrity and

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<sup>1</sup> This sentence has been attributed to various famous individuals, most often to Winston Churchill as well as to Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand and Klemens von Metternich.

<sup>2</sup> These are official Ukrainian data from 2020, except for Crimea, where they are from 2013 (the last year before the Russian Federation annexed the territory).

annexing over 22 percent of its territory, are violations of international law. According to point 4, article 2 of the UN Charter, both actions are considered contrary to a fundamental principle of international law: the prohibition of the threat or use of force.

Indeed, Ukraine and Russia have contrasting objectives in the conflict. Ukraine aims to restore its territorial integrity, secure full respect for its sovereignty, and maintain the freedom to choose its international alliances, including the option to join NATO and the EU. On the other hand, Russia seeks to control the annexed parts of Ukrainian territory, maintain influence over Ukraine, and prevent its accession to NATO and the EU.

Indeed, the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine presents the international community with a clear choice: to either condone or condemn Russian aggression. Given the blatant violation of international law and Ukraine's sovereignty, the decision should be relatively straightforward. Not that nothing similar ever happened, as Saddam Hussein did the same on August 2, 1990, when Iraq abolished the sovereignty of another UN member-state, Kuwait. Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of states voted in favor of condemnation every time the matter was put to vote at the Emergency Special session of the UN General Assembly (as Russia would have vetoed any UN Security Council resolution). It is also important to note that the five to seven states that voted against the General Assembly resolutions represented a predictable and not particularly appealing group. The number of Russia's supporters was very low. It included the following states in every case: Belarus, North Korea, and Syria; in two instances, Eritrea and Nicaragua, and once Mali joined the others. The number of abstentions ranged from 32 to 35, whereas another 10-12 states did not participate in voting. However, when the resolution moved beyond mere condemnation, the picture changed. It happened when the issue was depriving Russia of its membership in the UN Human Rights Council or when compensation for war damages was at stake. In those cases, the support shrank, and the number of abstentions rose sharply. Still, in both cases, the support for the motion was sufficient to pass a resolution.

This article examines one important aspect of the consequences of the war that has been raging on for nearly two years at the time of writing. It is contemplating the repercussions of the Russian war of aggression on the so-called post-Soviet space, the twelve republics<sup>3</sup> that were part of the Soviet Union a generation ago. Indeed, the proximity of ten of these states to both warring parties, coupled with their historical economic ties, shared infrastructure, common language (share a *lingua franca* widely spoken in each country), and deep cultural and human connections, means that the ongoing war directly impacts them to a greater extent than many other countries further away from the conflict zone. The proximity to the conflict presents a double-edged sword for these states, leading to both disadvantages and occasional advantages. While they may

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<sup>3</sup> Including the Russian Federation and Ukraine; excluding Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

openly acknowledge the losses incurred due to the war, they may be more hesitant to discuss any benefits they may gain, perhaps portraying themselves primarily as victims of circumstance rather than acknowledging any advantages arising from their position.

The voting patterns among the 12 former Soviet republics in the United Nations General Assembly differed from those of the entire UN membership of 193 states. Three states—Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—consistently voted in favor of the motion, indicating a large majority in support. On the other hand, Belarus and Russia consistently voted against the motion. The remaining seven states were divided between abstention and non-participation in the vote (see Table 1). The majority demonstrated reluctance to take sides, indirectly acknowledging diplomatic pressure from various directions. This is understandable, as Russia aimed to prevent universal condemnation of its aggression. In its “backyard,” seven states consistently avoided taking sides, partially aligning with Russia's objectives.

Russia launched its large-scale aggression on February 24, 2022, under conditions favorable to it both in the post-Soviet space and domestically. Several former Soviet republics, particularly Belarus, increased their dependence on Russia. Belarus, whose President, Alexander Lukashenko, received support from Russia to maintain power after the fraudulent presidential election of August 9, 2020, relied on Russia in various ways. In the South Caucasus, Russia consolidated its influence when it contributed to ending the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan and deployed a large peacekeeping contingent to monitor the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>4</sup> Although basic disagreements remained between Russia and Georgia, the government in Tbilisi has been pursuing a pragmatic policy and sought de-escalation. In Central Asia, several states felt their security was diminished with the return of the Taliban to power in August 2021 and were interested in military assistance from Russia. This was evident in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where counter-terrorism exercises were held with Russian participation. The situation was similar in Uzbekistan, which was interested in maintaining relations with Afghanistan despite the unfavorable regime change in that country in 2021. Kazakhstan had reasons to be grateful to Russia, as Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) troops helped restore order in the country between the 6th and 19th of January 2022. More than two-thirds of the troops were Russian, and no decision could have been taken in the organization without the active engagement of Moscow. Turkmenistan also warmed its relations with Russia. In sum, except for Moldova and Ukraine, it seems that Moscow was well-positioned to benefit from the support of the other former Soviet republics.

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<sup>4</sup> As it will be demonstrated later, this Russian advantage got lost three years later when Azerbaijan gained full control over Nagorno-Karabakh and the presence of Russian peace-keepers became redundant.

**Table 1. The Voting Pattern of the Twelve States of the Former Soviet Union at UNGA Emergency Special Session 11 (based on UNGA data – October 2, 2023).**

	11/1	11/2	11/3	11/4	11/5	11/6
Armenia	Abstention	Abstention	No participation	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention
Azerbaijan	No participation	No participation	No participation	No participation	No participation	No participation
Belarus	Against -	Against -	Against -	Against -	Against -	Against -
Georgia	In favor +	In favor +	In favor +	In favor +	In favor +	In favor +
Kazakhstan	Abstention	Abstention	Against -	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention
Kyrgyzstan	Abstention	Abstention	Against -	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention
Moldova	In favor +	In favor +	In favor +	In favor +	In favor +	In favor +
Russia	Against -	Against -	Against -	Against -	Against -	Against -
Tajikistan	Abstention	Abstention	Against -	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention
Turkmenistan	No participation	No participation	No participation	No participation	No participation	No participation
Ukraine	In favor +	In favor +	In favor +	In favor +	In favor +	In favor +
Uzbekistan	No participation	Abstention	Against -	Abstention	Abstention	Abstention

11/1 Aggression against Ukraine (adopted by: 141 Y, 5 N, 34 A – 13 No participation)

11/2 Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine (adopted by: 140 Y, 5 N, 38 A – 10 No participation)

11/3 Russia's suspension from the UN Human Rights Council (adopted by: 93 Y, 24 N, 58 A – 18 No participation)

11/4 Territorial integrity of Ukraine: Defending the principles of the UN Charter (adopted by: 143 Y, 5 N, 35 A – 10 No participation)

11/5 Furtherance of remedy and repatriation for aggression against Ukraine (adopted by: 91 Y, 13 N, 70 A – 19 No participation)

11/6 Principles of the UN Charter underlying a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in Ukraine (adopted by: 141 Y, 7 N, 32 A – 13 No participation)

Y = Yes

N = No

A = Abstention

Although domestically, the popularity of Putin's leadership has declined since 2018, when the additional boost of popularity stemming from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 got exhausted, and the sluggish growth of the economy due to lack of diversification, stagnation, and corruption hit a large part of the population, the situation remained manageable. After the COVID pandemic, the economy bounced back and produced 4.75 % growth in 2021. The President was in the middle of his term and could confidently look forward to staying in power, even without free and fair elections and amidst rising election fraud.

The war must not have come as a surprise to post-Soviet states. Some, like Belarus, must have been officially informed, as Russia used its territory in the launch of its military operation. Whether other states were aware is open to question, although the fast withdrawal of the troops of CSTO member-states from Kazakhstan must have given some indication. As NATO member states were briefed about the coming war of aggression in November 2021, it cannot be excluded that some former Soviet states also received hints about what was coming.

How did the former Soviet republics react to the war? When the war started, the post-Soviet states were quite cautious and reactive initially. They did not want to damage their relations with either party. They were waiting to see what was coming. Then they saw the war would be raging on with Russia not realizing its original grand strategic objective to "denazify and demilitarize" Ukraine by installing a pro-Russian puppet regime and thus depriving Ukraine of its political independence, an act of violating state sovereignty as the taking, occupying, annexing a part of the territory (or the whole) of a sovereign state. The majority of the countries that were reluctant to take a prominent stance, seven of 12 states, opted for low visibility. This left the international community to speculate about the actual developments and make efforts to influence them in various directions. Consequently, there was often an amplification of various activities and statements.

## **The Reaction of the States of the Former Soviet Union**

### ***Belarus***

Looking beyond the two warring parties, Belarus's approach is relatively straightforward. It supported Russia in international diplomacy, including with its vote at the Emergency Special Session of the UN General Assembly. Additionally, Belarus provided its territory for the aggression, hosting approximately thirty thousand Russian troops at the beginning of the invasion. The mere fact Belarus allowed its territory to be used for aggression made the country an aggressor as "[t]he action of a State in allowing its territory, which it has placed at the disposal

of another State, to be used by that other State for perpetrating an act of aggression against a third State”<sup>5</sup> is a case of aggression. There was no need for further assistance with this qualification. It means that providing troops or armaments and equipment would not have changed the international legal assessment of the role of Belarus. However, Minsk also made available its military airfields for logistical purposes and supplied large amounts of armaments, including T-72 battle tanks and thousands of tons of ammunition. At the beginning of the war, its territory, sharing a nearly 1,100 km long border with Ukraine, was used for attacks with missiles, aiming, among others, at Kyiv. Since Belarus shares a common border with three NATO member-states—Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland—forward deployment was also used to increase the perceived threat to those states and NATO as a whole. This was achieved by both traditional and non-traditional means. It is worth noting that Belarus deployed illegal migrants on its border with Poland in 2021 and provoked its western neighbor, forcing it to balance humanitarian concerns with security measures. With the apparent failure of this murky attempt, Belarus presented a threat by: Forward deployment of conventional military forces and potentially Russian short-range nuclear weapons; Hosting, albeit temporarily, fighters of the Wagner Group after the mutiny of June 24, 2023; Increasing military activity in the border area, including Belarusian helicopters violating Polish airspace.<sup>6</sup> The volatility of the situation stems from the importance of the so-called Suwalki Gap, which connects Belarus with the Kaliningrad exclave of the Russian Federation. An attempt to occupy it and thus establish a land corridor between Belarus and Russia would constitute an aggression against NATO member states and, hence, be very ill-advised for Russia to pursue. Yet, it entails a major strategic risk. Thus, we face a classical dilemma: Low likelihood but high strategic risk means the Alliance cannot ignore and must consider such a scenario.

This occurred even though the Russian Federation also shares a land border with those three states. Beyond the apparent strategic advantage of deploying closer to the territory of NATO members, it also served as an indication of Belarus’s dependence on Russia. However, the support of President Lukashenka was not limitless. Belarus did not provide troops, likely for reasons related to domestic politics. Understandably, as Lukashenko only recently regained control over the country following months of widespread demonstrations following the August 2020 fraudulent elections, the president did not want to take any risks. Such risks could be associated with potential military casualties, which could have ignited unpredictable processes. Furthermore, the armed forces of Belarus are relatively small, with approximately 45,000 troops, and only a small portion (5-10 thousand) among them are considered well-trained. Society’s support for the

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<sup>5</sup> See “Definition of Aggression, UN General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX),” December 14, 1974, Annex point 3(f), [https://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?OpenAgent&DS=A/RES/3314\(XXIX\)&Lang=E](https://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?OpenAgent&DS=A/RES/3314(XXIX)&Lang=E).

<sup>6</sup> “Why Are Tensions Mounting on the Belarus-Poland Border?” *BBC*, August 10, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66410230>.

war remained limited. Cases of sabotage by employees of the Belarus railway system aimed to prevent supplies to Russian forces attacking Ukraine.<sup>7</sup>

The subordination of Belarus to Russia left little room for maneuvering for President Lukashenko. His rhetoric reflected this when he occasionally made more radical statements than his Russian counterpart. He expressed regret that Ukraine did not face an all-out war already in 2014 when it was unprepared for it.<sup>8</sup> This behavior, possibly coordinated with Moscow, continued when, at some international meetings, the representative of Belarus was more radical and critical of the West than Russia.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to know whether Belarus has been rewarded for its loyalty. If one starts from the premise that President Lukashenko was in massive debt due to Russia's "support and assistance" to survive the difficult times following August 2020, it could be concluded that it was payback time. However, as it is known, President Lukashenko never missed an opportunity to play tricks on his main partner. Nevertheless, Lukashenko is aware that his room for maneuvering is strictly limited, and Russia, despite its current difficulties, has enormous economic influence on his regime. With the collapse of Belarus' exports to the West and the significant reduction of exports to Ukraine, Russia's monopolistic position, particularly in the decisive hydrocarbon sector, strengthened further. The regular income stream, importing crude oil and gas from Russia, processing it, and exporting the products to the West, gave way to importing from Russia and re-exporting the processed products to Russia. However, this reorientation was accompanied by a contraction in the Belarusian economy overall. The contraction slowed down from 5.2 to 4.7% towards the end of 2022 as the regime adjusted to sanctions. Still, dependence on Russia increased further, and Russia was not hesitant to impose some rules on its weaker partner, including a new tax agreement calling for indirect taxation.<sup>10</sup> Belarus bore severe economic difficulties, so it attempted to diversify its external economic relations. During a visit by President Lukashenko to Beijing, new Chinese investments amounting to USD

<sup>7</sup> RFE/RL Belarus Service, "Belarusian 'Railway Guerrilla' Handed 13 Years in Prison," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 9, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-railway-guerrilla-13-year-prison/32215523.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Zoya Sheftalovich, "Belarus' Lukashenko: 'The Only Mistake We Made' Was Not Finishing off Ukraine with Russia in 2014," *Politico*, June 2, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/belarus-alexander-lukashenko-mistake-not-invade-ukraine-russia-2014-vladimir-putin/>.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. "Statement by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Y. Ambrazevich at the meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council (November 30, 2023, Skopje)," <https://mfa.gov.by/en/press/statements/c739f0832cc1b03c.html> and "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks during the 30th meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council, Skopje, November 30, 2023," [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1918477/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1918477/).

<sup>10</sup> Maxim Samorukov, "The Importance of Being Russian: Can Belarus Survive the Kremlin's War Against Ukraine?" *Carnegie Politika*, November 3, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88317>.



3.5 billion were agreed.<sup>11</sup> A second visit to China in less than a year, with a clear focus on industrial cooperation and the enlargement of the China-Belarus industrial park, demonstrated the squeezing effect of the unilateral dependence of Minsk on Moscow.<sup>12</sup> Belarus' exports to China have indeed increased since the Russian war against Ukraine broke out, particularly in the agricultural and fertilizer sectors, which together represent USD 1.4 billion of the total USD 1.6 billion.<sup>13</sup> However, this cannot compensate for the decisive importance of Russia as an economic partner.

The case of Belarus illustrates how the Russian aggression against Ukraine left Minsk with little choice, being the country that has the closest constitutional relationship and economic (inter)dependence with Moscow. However, this dependence is not based solely on these factors but also on the increasing isolation of Minsk, attributed to the country's long-term policies, especially those surrounding the fraudulent elections of August 2020. Attempts to reduce the heavy dependence on Russia will likely remain inconclusive.

### **Moldova**

The other former Soviet republic that does not belong to a distinct subregion in the former Soviet space is Moldova. It is one of the smallest and poorest former Soviet republics in Europe. It is often referred to as a "sandwiched state" due to its geographic position between Ukraine and Romania, the former being a post-Soviet state and the latter an EU and NATO member. Moldova is directly affected by the ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine. If Russia were to achieve its original objective of depriving Ukraine of its political independence and installing a pro-Russian puppet regime, Moldova's situation would deteriorate significantly. As the original Russian "grand strategic" objectives have receded since then, giving way to a more realistic, limited military objective of gaining territory from Ukraine, Moldova's immediate existential concern has also shifted. However, for a time, Moldova rightly feared that Russia might advance to its eastern border and then attempt to establish Transnistria as an independent pseudo-state, annex the territory, or even consider occupying all of Moldova. Those models have been applied in recent Russian history, with the former being utilized in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the latter in Crimea, and the four Ukrainian territories (*oblasts*) annexed by Russia in September 2022. In addition to verbal threats, such as warning Moldova not to pose a threat to Russian forces in Transnistria, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasized that "any actions

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<sup>11</sup> President of the Republic of Belarus, "Aleksandr Lukashenko Concludes State Visit to China," March 2, 2023, <https://president.gov.by/en/events/zavershilsya-gosudarstvennyy-vizit-aleksandra-lukashenko-v-kitayskuyu-narodnuyu-respubliku-1677744000>.

<sup>12</sup> "Chinese-Belarusian Presidents Pledge to Enhance Ties," *Xinhua*, December 4, 2023, <https://english.news.cn/20231204/160174440a844fb99ea1c2c71d6d20dd/c.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Pavel Slunkin et al., "Belarus Change Tracker, December 2022 – February 2023" (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2023), 16, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/20148-20230322.pdf>.

threatening the security of our service personnel will be treated as attacks against the Russian Federation.”<sup>14</sup> Moscow also attempted to destabilize Chisinau using well-known hybrid methods, including influencing the media space, gaining influence over elements of the Moldovan government, and fueling dissatisfaction and demonstrations. These efforts led to changes in the composition of the government<sup>15</sup> and a series of demonstrations against the country’s leadership. However, a government crisis was averted. Evidence was successfully collected regarding the external funding of the anti-government demonstrators.<sup>16</sup> The leadership stayed on a pro-Western course, benefiting from the Association Agreement with the EU (including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement), increasing Moldova’s trade turnover with the West,<sup>17</sup> and, last but not least, reducing its energy dependence and eliminating its gas dependence on Russia.<sup>18</sup> Overall, Moldova successfully reduced its dependence on various dimensions, including the media, economy, and energy. Chisinau benefited from the fact that these processes started before the Russian aggression against Ukraine and could continue beyond it.

There are two important questions:

1. Can Moldova maintain its internal political stability and continue the international political course it adopted since 2020? There is little doubt that Russia will persist in its attempts to undermine Moldova’s still fragile socio-political cohesion. However, Moldova appears well-prepared and has learned from decades of unsuccessful efforts to fend off Russian interference.
2. Will the country continue with its “incomplete” Western integration agenda and maintain its constitutional neutrality (as outlined in Article

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<sup>14</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks and Answers to Questions at a Meeting with MGIMO Students, Teachers and Professors on the Start of the New Academic Year, Moscow, September 1, 2022,” [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1828196/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1828196/).

<sup>15</sup> Pawel Kowal, “Moldova’s Escape from the East,” *GIS Reports*, May 31, 2023, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/moldova-russia-east/>.

<sup>16</sup> Rob Picheta, “Why Moldova Fears It Could Be Next for Putin,” *CNN*, February 26, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/26/europe/moldova-transnistria-russia-tensions-explainer-intl/index.html>.

<sup>17</sup> 49.3% of Moldova’s total external trade was conducted with the EU, where 58.7% of its exports were directed in 2022. European Commission, “Moldova: EU Trade Relations with Moldova – Facts, Figures, and Latest Developments,” [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/moldova\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/moldova_en).

<sup>18</sup> Alexander Tanas, “Moldova No Longer Needs Russian Gas, Minister Says,” *Reuters*, March 16, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/moldova-no-longer-needs-russian-gas-minister-says-2023-03-16/>.

11, Paragraph 1 of the constitution), focusing on “intensified, accelerated cooperation with NATO,”<sup>19</sup> or will it take a more radical step and abandon its neutrality? Such a move would undoubtedly be viewed as a provocation by Russia, signaling that Moldova and its partners no longer see the need for pragmatic steps and are prepared to confront Russia directly.

### **South Caucasus**

The three states of the South Caucasus—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—present a “colorful entity.” Armenia’s membership in the CSTO and the EAEU suggests a close association with the Russian Federation, which plays a leading role in these organizations. Azerbaijan maintains a strong friendship with Russia, as evidenced by the relations between the two presidents. Georgia, on the other hand, has leaned towards the West over the past twenty years and also fought a war with Russia fifteen years ago. However, drawing conclusions based solely on these observations would lead to a fundamental misunderstanding of the situation.

Georgia joined the states that condemned the Russian aggression in the UN General Assembly, indicating its stance against the conflict. Armenia, on the other hand, abstained from voting. Azerbaijan chose not to participate in the repeated votes. However, upon closer examination of the reactions of these three states to the Russian aggression, the picture gets blurred.

Despite its close association with Russia, Armenia has faced many problems with Moscow since 2018. Tensions between Moscow and Yerevan escalated following the so-called April revolution. During the revolution, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan consistently assured that the changes would be strictly domestic and would not impact the country’s foreign relations. He was well aware that Russia, closely monitoring the situation, needed to be neutralized, at least in public discourse. Despite Russia’s lingering suspicions, it had to come to terms with the change. However, the nature of democracy introduced an element of unpredictability. As events unfolded, Russia indicated its suspicion and dissatisfaction through various means, although it carefully calibrated its actions in public. For instance, when former President Robert Kocharian (now a leading figure in the opposition) was arrested, Vladimir Putin congratulated him on his birthday, while Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov expressed his view that the arrest contradicted the Armenian leadership’s pledge not to “persecute its predecessors for

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<sup>19</sup> Anca Grădinaru and Cristina Popușoi, “Interviu Ministrul de externe moldovean, la Vilnius: Apropierea Ucrainei de NATO va ajuta R. Moldova sa ramana stabila [Interview with the Moldovan Foreign Minister in Vilnius: Ukraine’s Approach to NATO Will Help the Republic of Moldova to Remain Stable],” *Europa Libera Romania*, July 11 2023, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/interviu-nicu-popescu-la-vilnius-miscarea-ucrainei-spre-nato-va-ajuta-r-moldova-sa-ramana-stabila-/32499134.html>.

political motives.”<sup>20</sup> When the “My Step” political alliance, led by Prime Minister Pashinyan, achieved a landslide victory in the elections in December 2018, winning more than seventy percent of the votes,<sup>21</sup> Russian electronic media seemingly hesitated to report on the results for three days. Subsequently, the news appeared on the toolbar of Russian TV channels. This was in stark contrast to the usual practice where incumbent victories in the former Soviet Union are promptly, regularly, and widely broadcast by Russian media, often followed by customary congratulations from the Russian president.

Relations deteriorated further when Azerbaijan initiated a war in September 2020 to regain Nagorno-Karabakh, which Armenia had occupied for 26 years. It became apparent that the territory was illegally held under Armenian rule. Given this, it was understandable that Russia stayed out of the military conflict. However, Armenians, partly misinformed by their own media, felt betrayed. Russia made it clear at the onset of the war that it would only intervene in support of Armenia if its genuine national territory (not Nagorno-Karabakh or the seven surrounding districts that Yerevan had occupied by force in the early 1990s) was attacked. Russia maintained this position throughout the 44 days of hostilities. However, Moscow closely monitored the developments and, while not directly involved in the conflict, asserted a pivotal role in achieving a ceasefire.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Russia deployed peacekeepers to separate the forces of the two states and stabilize the situation with a nearly two-thousand-person-strong Russian contingent. On another level, it was evident that Russia felt closer to Azerbaijan than Armenia, and influential Russian electronic media clearly projected this image.

Relations between Armenia and Russia remained strained. Russia clearly hoped for Pashinyan to lose the elections held after the war, during which Armenia lost the seven surrounding districts and one-third of Nagorno-Karabakh proper. However, Nikol Pashinyan’s forces narrowly won the election in June 2021, this time securing 53.9% of the valid votes.<sup>23</sup> Pashinyan could credibly argue that further postponing the signing of the ceasefire (and thus the recognition of its defeat) would have resulted in the full and near-immediate loss of Nagorno-Karabakh as a whole. Armenia was well aware of the limits of its freedom

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<sup>20</sup> “Kocharian Sees ‘Serious Support’ from Putin,” *Azattyun*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.azattyun.am/a/29498757.html>.

<sup>21</sup> RFE/RL, “Pashinian Alliance Scores ‘Revolutionary Majority’ in Landslide Armenian Win,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 8, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenian-elections-pashinian-my-step-sarkisian-hhk/29645721.html>.

<sup>22</sup> “Document: Full Text of the Agreement between the Leaders of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan,” *commonsense.eu*, November 10, 2020, [www.commonspace.eu/news/document-full-text-agreement-between-leaders-russia-armenia-and-azerbaijan](http://www.commonspace.eu/news/document-full-text-agreement-between-leaders-russia-armenia-and-azerbaijan).

<sup>23</sup> OSCE, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), “Republic of Armenia: Early Parliamentary Elections, 20 June 2021,” ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report (Warsaw: OSCE, October 27, 2021), 33, [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/4/502386\\_0.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/4/502386_0.pdf).

of action. In the beginning of January 2022, when Yerevan chaired the CSTO, Armenia joined the consensus that the organization would “assist” Kazakhstan by military force to overcome its internal problems at the beginning of the year.

It was a significant symbolic step when Yerevan, along with Baku, decided to diversify the forces monitoring the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>24</sup> This decision indicated a weakening of Russia’s earlier nearly monopolistic influence. However, Russia also recognized the risks involved. On the one hand, Russian peacekeepers assisted in supplying the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh to prevent a humanitarian disaster. On the other hand, when the two parties agreed to involve EU observers in Nagorno-Karabakh, Vladimir Putin summoned the two leaders to Moscow and left no doubt about his country’s essential role in conflict management.<sup>25</sup> This illustrated Russia’s sensitivity to any Western presence in the former Soviet Union, even in a limited capacity.

Armenia continued to feel let down by Russia despite the complexities of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. There were numerous signs that Russia sought to constrain Armenia’s political independence. In response, Armenia appeared to make a strategic shift, symbolized by humanitarian assistance to Ukraine delivered by Prime Minister Pashinyan’s spouse. The prime minister commented: “[A]s a result of the events in Ukraine, the capabilities of Russia have changed ... Our strategy should be to try in this situation to maximally decrease our dependency on others.”<sup>26</sup> Armenia’s announcement of its plan to ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), particularly at a time when the chief prosecutor of the Court had already charged Vladimir Putin with war crimes, intensified tensions. To mitigate potential damage, Putin found it necessary to declare that his country had “no problems with Armenia.”<sup>27</sup> It is evident that Moscow, leveraging its residual influence not absorbed by the war in Ukraine, is working to bring Armenia “back in line.”<sup>28</sup> Commentators emphasize the need

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<sup>24</sup> However, the area of responsibility of the unarmed EU observer mission extended to the entire shared border of Armenia and Azerbaijan. “EU Mission in Armenia, Q&A on the EU Mission in Armenia/EUMA,” *EUMA*, May 12, 2023, [www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/qa-eu-mission-armenia-euma\\_en](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/euma/qa-eu-mission-armenia-euma_en).

<sup>25</sup> Burç Eryugur, “Russian President Holds Trilateral Meeting with Azerbaijani Counterpart, Armenian Premier,” *Anadolu Ajansi*, May 26, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/russian-president-holds-trilateral-meeting-with-azerbaijani-counterpart-armenian-premier/2906228>.

<sup>26</sup> Gabriel Gavin, “We Can’t Rely on Russia to Protect Us Anymore, Armenian PM Says,” *Politico*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/we-cant-rely-russia-protect-us-anymore-nikol-pashinyan-armenia-pm/>.

<sup>27</sup> “Putin Says ‘No Problems’ in Russia’s Ties with Armenia,” *AlArabiya News*, September 12, 2023, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2023/09/12/Putin-says-no-problems-in-Russia-s-ties-with-Armenia>.

<sup>28</sup> Joshua Kucera, “Is Armenia Turning to the West?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-pashinian-united-states-west-relations-russia-analysis/32591327.html>.

for increased EU commitment to prevent the situation from escalating into a proxy war.<sup>29</sup>

While Armenia is clearly distancing itself from excessive dependence on Russia, Azerbaijan has undoubtedly drawn closer to its northern neighbor. In the first decade of independence, the Yeltsin administration maintained a strong pro-Armenian position. However, this shifted towards a more balanced relationship as Vladimir Putin recognized the relatively greater importance of Azerbaijan, considering factors such as population size, GDP, and hydrocarbon resources, beyond any personal sympathy he may have had towards the presidents of Azerbaijan. The balance began to tilt in favor of Baku, particularly since 2018, when Armenia underwent changes that Moscow viewed unfavorably. Russia's alignment with Azerbaijan was also influenced by regime similarities, which were no longer as apparent in its relationship with Armenia post-2018.

The stalemated yet rather volatile situation changed unexpectedly in September 2023, three years after the 44-day-long war. Azerbaijan initiated a rapid "anti-terrorist operation" on September 19. Russian media continued to reflect its earlier position that the country would not become involved in the conflict as long as it remained confined to Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan successfully eliminated the presence of Armenian armed forces in the Armenian-controlled part of Nagorno-Karabakh, prompting the Armenian leadership in the area to vacate the region. The President of Azerbaijan announced the following day that his country had "restored sovereignty."<sup>30</sup> The Russian Federation indicated its readiness to broker a ceasefire between the parties. The RT chief editor, Margarita Simonyan (herself of Armenian origin), reminded Armenia that "[N]obody has ever helped Armenia except Russia. And no one will ever help. Not knowing this means not wanting to know."<sup>31</sup> However, understandably, this "help" came with a price tag, reflected in Armenia's dependence on Russia. On the one hand, the developments in September 2023 closed an important chapter as the protracted conflict came to an end. On the other hand, it meant that Russia no longer had influence as an arbiter between the two parties by intervening in their conflict.

Following the war of September-November 2020, Azerbaijan contemplated various scenarios in which the fragile ceasefire could give way again to the use of force. Four scenarios appeared in public literature, and one of them, the "Threat of terrorist acts," served as a reference point when engaging in hostilities

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<sup>29</sup> George Meneshian, "Azerbaijan Exploits Vacuum on Nagorno-Karabakh," *Social Europe Newsletter*, September 27, 2023.

<sup>30</sup> James Kilner, "Azerbaijan's Victory Hurts a Putin Critic, but Pushes Armenia toward Western Allies," *The Telegraph*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/09/20/azerbaijan-putin-critic-armenia-western-allies-nagorno/>.

<sup>31</sup> Ismi Aghayev, Arshaluys Barseghyan, and Shota Kincha, "Azerbaijan Demands Complete Surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh as It Launches Massive Offensive," *Open Caucasus Media*, September 19, 2023, <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijan-demands-complete-surrender-of-nagorno-karabakh-as-it-launches-massive-offensive/>.

in September 2023.<sup>32</sup> Baku acknowledged that Armenia had adopted a constructive attitude after the 2020 war, which certainly implied, or at least included, verbal recognition of Azerbaijan's sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh. However, Armenians were disheartened by the loss of their "de facto" state, leading to heightened tensions. This tension was evidenced by Azerbaijan's blocking of the Lachin corridor, resulting in a humanitarian crisis in the Armenian-held part of Nagorno-Karabakh. Although somewhat alleviated by the Russian peacekeepers and ICRC deliveries, these were later blocked. When Azerbaijan initiated the so-called counter-terrorist operation on September 19, the presence of Armenian military and irregulars was cited by Baku as justification. The circumstances surrounding the appearance of Armenian military and paramilitary personnel in Nagorno-Karabakh are evidently murky. Understandably, Azerbaijan used this as one of its arguments for resuming military efforts to occupy/regain control and sovereignty over the rest of Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>33</sup> Whether there will ever be sufficient and impartial clarification remains to be seen.

If one sees a crisis as an opportunity, a new chapter may be opening for Yerevan. With a somewhat reduced dependence on Russia following the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenia may now have the chance to determine its own political orientation. Prime Minister Pashinyan currently enjoys a large majority in the legislative body, and even if this support were to erode somewhat in light of the Nagorno-Karabakh events, it may still be sufficient. Additionally, the fact that the next elections for the Armenian parliament are not scheduled until 2026 provides ample time for the current political course to solidify.

However, we can be confident that Russia will persist in its efforts to capitalize on the dissatisfaction among the Armenian people following the Karabakh conflict, aiming for a pro-Russian regime change. Russian media anchors and non-governmental actors have even encouraged Armenians to protest against the government.<sup>34</sup> Extensive coverage of demonstrations in Armenia by Russian media, along with calls for early elections and potential support for the opposition led by former pro-Russian President Robert Kocharyan, indicate Russia's intentions. Ultimately, the future direction of Armenia's political course will depend on the Armenian people and the dynamics among various political forces.

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<sup>32</sup> Agil Rustamzade, "The Possibility of a New Military Confrontation between Armenia and Azerbaijan: Assessment of Risks and Threats in the Short Term," *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives* 3, no. 2 (Winter 2022): 69-80, [https://cspjournal.az/uploads/files/Summer%202022/Vol\\_3\\_IS\\_2\\_Winter2022/CSP\\_vol3%20issue2\\_Summer%202022%20Web%20\(FINAL\)%20\(2\).pdf](https://cspjournal.az/uploads/files/Summer%202022/Vol_3_IS_2_Winter2022/CSP_vol3%20issue2_Summer%202022%20Web%20(FINAL)%20(2).pdf).

<sup>33</sup> "Statement by Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defense," September 19, 2023, <https://mod.gov.az/en/news/statement-by-azerbaijan-s-ministry-of-defense-49350.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Ananyan on X, "Russian Propagandists Margarita Simonyan and Vladimir Solovyov Have Even Called on Armenians to Participate in Anti-government Demonstrations," <https://twitter.com/robananyan/status/1707133662997696672>.

Whether Armenia will continue on a pro-western trajectory or revert to its decades-long policy of dependence on Russia remains to be seen. The extent to which the West reciprocates Armenia's Western initiatives will be crucial, and Western engagement must remain cautious and selective.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, it is crucial to recognize that Armenia is a small and relatively economically disadvantaged country, with the smallest territory and population among the 12 former Soviet republics. Russia holds significant economic leverage over Armenia, as illustrated in Table 2. If the West wishes to prevent unfavorable changes in Yerevan, it must act decisively and allocate greater resources to support Armenia's current political trajectory. This entails diplomatic support and tangible economic assistance to bolster Armenia's independence and resilience in the face of external pressures.

Indeed, Armenia's loss of the territories it had occupied between the early 1990s and 2020 marks a significant turning point in the country's history. With a reduced reliance on Russia, Armenia now enjoys a degree of autonomy, albeit with uncertainties regarding the sustainability of its statehood under the current democratic and less corrupt regime. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's efforts to foster unity in the country are understandable, as he seeks to attribute the losses primarily to Azerbaijan while also acknowledging the role of the Russian Federation:

The capture of Khtsaberd and the Hin Tagher of Nagorno-Karabakh in December 2020 and the capture of more than 60 Armenian servicemen, the events of Parukh, the numerous expressions of intimidation of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, the illegal blocking of the Lachin Corridor, the September 19 Azerbaijani attack on Nagorno-Karabakh, raise serious questions in Nagorno-Karabakh as well about the goals and motives of the peace-keeping troops of the Russian Federation ... The attacks undertaken by Azerbaijan against the Republic of Armenia in recent years lead to an obvious conclusion that the external security systems in which we are involved are not effective for the state interests and security of the Republic of Armenia. This was seen both during the 44-day war and during the May and November events in 2021, as well as in September 2022, and this list goes on.<sup>36</sup>

The rejection of the statement by the Russian Federation was unsurprising and partly justified. Armenia could not rely on CSTO (Russian) assistance to maintain control over the territories it had occupied by force, and therefore illegally, in the early 1990s. Additionally, Russia dismissed the notion that the attacks on September 19, 2023, were a result of illegal Armenian presence in Nagorno-

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<sup>35</sup> See Michael C. Keays, "What the Resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Teaches Us," *Kennan Cable*, no. 86 (Wilson Center, December 2023), [www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/KennanCable86.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/KennanCable86.pdf).

<sup>36</sup> "Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's Message about Independence," *The Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia*, September 24, 2023, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2023/09/24/Nikol-Pashinyan-messages/>.



Table 2. The Performance of the Twelve States.<sup>37</sup>

	Human Development Index (HDI) (2022)	Corruption Perception Index (CPI) (2022)	Human Freedom Rank (HF) (2023)	Democracy Index (EIU) (2022)	Henley Passport Index (2022)
<b>Armenia</b>	85	63-64	40-41	82 (Hybrid regime)	66
<b>Azerbaijan</b>	91	157-161	127	134 (Authoritarian)	70
<b>Belarus</b>	60	91-93	109	153 (Authoritarian)	78
<b>Georgia</b>	63	41-44	40-41	90 (Hybrid regime)	116
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	56	101-109	106	127-128 (Authoritarian)	76
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	118	140-141	81	116 (Authoritarian)	64
<b>Moldova</b>	80	91-93	61	69 (Flawed Democracy)	121
<b>Russia</b>	52	137-139	126	146 (Authoritarian)	119
<b>Tajikistan</b>	122	150-156	153	156-157 (Authoritarian)	60
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	91	167-170	n.a.	161 (Authoritarian)	53
<b>Ukraine</b>	77	116-122	98	87 (Hybrid regime)	144
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	101	126-129	n.a.	149 (Authoritarian)	59

Karabakh. Instead, Russia emphasized its good intentions, cautioning that “the Armenian leadership is making a huge mistake by deliberately attempting to sever Armenia’s multifaceted and centuries-old ties with Russia, making the country a hostage to Western geopolitical games. We are confident that the

<sup>37</sup> According to Human Development Index, Corruption Perception Index, Human Freedom Index, Democracy Index, Henley Passport Index as of October 2, 2023.

overwhelming majority of the Armenian population realises this as well.”<sup>38</sup> The intention of Russian diplomacy is clear: to foster the achievement of a pro-Russian change of government in Armenia and recreate Armenia’s dependency on Russia. However, Russia’s current heavy engagement in the war against Ukraine may limit its attention and resources. Therefore, Russia is attempting to mitigate its discord with Yerevan and biding its time.

With this, the prediction made by Yevgenii Primakov, who served as the external intelligence chief of Russia and later as foreign minister and prime minister, was realized. In 1994, he conveyed the following statement to Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrosyan: “Azerbaijan can work and wait. They have the resources. In 10, 20, 30 years, they will gain strength and take everything from you.”<sup>39</sup> With the evacuation of the entire Armenian population from Nagorno-Karabakh by the end of September 2023 and the dissolution of the entity on December 31, 2023, a significant chapter of history has come to a close. Despite resulting in a severe humanitarian crisis for Armenia, with 110,000 asylum seekers in a country with a population of 2.9 million, and unless the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh leads to a change in leadership in Yerevan, potentially influenced by Russia’s direct or indirect involvement, Armenia now has the opportunity to embark on a new chapter in its history. Hopefully, this chapter will be more successful than its previous dependence on Russia.

Led by a president more strongly legitimized than ever following its second victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan will likely continue its current political course, characterized by strict autocratic rule domestically and a vectoral foreign policy internationally. Azerbaijan’s economy, which relies heavily on hydrocarbon exports and lacks sufficient diversification, will continue to generate income from the West, leveraging advantages such as increasing its market share due to sanctions on Russia. Despite this, Azerbaijan will maintain close ties with Russia under its current leadership, driven in part by the similarity between the Baku and Moscow regimes.

For two decades, Georgia stood as the strongest pro-Western state in the South Caucasus. During this time, societal changes led to a significant decline in Russian influence, with Russian electronic media losing its sway and the younger generation moving away from the Russian language. This trend was particularly pronounced during the Saakashvili era (2004-2013). The August 2008 war with Russia, along with Russia’s subsequent “recognition” of the “independence” of

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<sup>38</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Ministry Statement Regarding an Address by the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, and the Situation around Nagorno-Karabakh,” September 25, 2023, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1906229/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1906229/).

<sup>39</sup> “‘They Will Gain Strength and ...’: Primakov’s 30-Year-old Prophecy about Nagorno-Karabakh Has Been Fulfilled,” November 13, 2020, accessed March 31, 2021, [https://tsargrad.tv/news/oni-naberut-sily-i-ispolnilos-prorochestvo-primakova-30-letnej-davnosti-o-nagornom-karabahe\\_297593](https://tsargrad.tv/news/oni-naberut-sily-i-ispolnilos-prorochestvo-primakova-30-letnej-davnosti-o-nagornom-karabahe_297593).

Abkhazia and South Ossetia, further strained relations between the two countries. Following President Saakashvili's departure from office (and the country), Georgia continued to uphold its pro-Western course under new leadership. Despite political tensions, economic ties between Georgia and Russia have flourished in recent years, with substantial growth in bilateral trade and Russian tourists becoming a significant source of revenue for the Georgian tourism sector. However, these developments have stirred debate within Georgian society about the country's current political trajectory. While some perceive the government's approach as a betrayal, accusing it of growing too close to Moscow, others argue for maintaining positive relations with Georgia's large northern neighbor. This delicate balancing act underscores the nuanced nature of Georgia's foreign policy, characterized by a strategic alignment known as a "vectoral policy." Despite some Western dissatisfaction with Georgia's pace in joining sanctions against Russia and occasional doubts about its full commitment, Georgia has managed to maintain a delicate balance. The country remains steadfast on matters of principle, such as refraining from reestablishing diplomatic relations with Russia as long as Moscow supports the two self-proclaimed states it created. At the same time, Georgia has benefited from increased economic ties with Russia. The picture is complemented by the tens of thousands of Russian citizens resettled in Georgia, partly in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and subsequent mobilization orders in 2022, which has strained societal relations. However, Georgia's approach is guided by its own experiences, particularly the war with Russia 15 years ago, which has instilled a deep understanding of the importance of international solidarity in such situations.

### ***The Central Asian States***

Central Asia stands out as a region within the former Soviet Union, where Russia has established an exceptionally strong position, while the presence of the West remains relatively weak. Among the contributing factors are the geographical distance from Europe and North America, the absence of official status for the five Central Asian states within the European Union (often referred to as the "neighbors' neighbors"), limited economic interaction with the West (with Kazakhstan being a partial exception), and the ongoing challenges in the region's political and economic transformation. Consequently, for the Central Asian states, Russia represents their primary partner, as there is no significant alternative offering a democratic agenda with distinct differences. However, a competitor is emerging in Central Asia that, unlike the West, does not offer an alternative political model and presents a limited agenda towards its partners: China. China's public agenda lacks comprehensiveness, as it does not impose systemic requirements on its partners. Instead, China avoids addressing sensitive topics such as human rights, the nature of its own political regime, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, and the treatment of the Uyghur population. This approach undoubtedly appeals to autocratic leaders in the region. However, China presents an alternative to Russia, and the latter cannot comment on controversies due to its own

dependence on Beijing. This creates a fundamentally different situation compared to the West, where Russia is vocal and sharpens controversies to externalize its problems and achieve a “rally around the flag” effect domestically. In Central Asia, the question is not either-or; the regional states can navigate between the two most influential actors. Central Asian states closely monitor how power shifts between Russia and China affect them. With Russia’s engagement in Ukraine and its unavoidable weakening, reliance on China will increase, while some attempts are made not to lose the attention of the West entirely.

For the Central Asian states, Russia’s large-scale war on Ukraine broke out at a time when they all perceived a deterioration in their security situation. This was primarily due to the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021 and the upheaval in Kazakhstan in January 2022. Given these circumstances, the increasing reliance on Russia was logical, especially for the three states belonging to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). It could be expected that due to their dependency, the Central Asian states would “live with” the Russian aggression, and indeed, they did. However, none of them sided with Russia in the UN General Assembly. Instead, they either abstained or did not participate in the vote on the resolution condemning the aggression. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the substantive reactions of the five states are dissimilar. Understanding their changing approach to Russia is made more challenging by the tendency of Western media to focus on events-based sensationalism rather than lasting tendencies. Western media often emphasizes pronouncements and events that indicate a rupture in relations between Moscow and the region. With this caveat in mind, it can be stated that some Central Asian states have distanced themselves from Russia.

The distancing of Kazakhstan, the largest Central Asian country with the biggest total GDP, has garnered the most interest. A month after the beginning of the high-intensity war, Kazakhstan officially pledged not to assist Russia in circumventing the sanctions.<sup>40</sup> There were rumors that Russia requested (at least symbolically) a military presence from Kazakhstan in the aggression, which the president of the latter promptly declined. President Tokayev also refused to recognize the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics.<sup>41</sup> Further, Kazakhstan provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, although, unlike Armenia later, Astana did not make a big symbolic issue of it. When President Tokayev met his Russian counterpart on May 16, 2022, in Moscow and on June 17 at the St Petersburg International Economic Forum, Tokayev left no doubt about his

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<sup>40</sup> Georgi Gotev, “Kazakh Official: We Will Not Risk Being Placed in the Same Basket as Russia,” *Euractiv*, March 29, 2022, Interview with Timur Suleimenov, Deputy chief of staff of the presidential administration of Kazakhstan, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/interview/kazakh-official-we-will-not-risk-being-placed-in-the-same-basket-as-russia/>.

<sup>41</sup> Georgi Gotev, “Kazakhstan Takes Distance from Russia’s Ukraine War,” *Euractiv*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/kazakhstan-takes-distance-from-russias-ukraine-war/>.

country's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war. In St. Petersburg, while referring to the UN Charter as the basis of international law, President Tokayev said:

It has been calculated that if the right of nations to self-determination was realized in reality on the entire globe, over 500 or 600 states would emerge on Earth, instead of the 193 states that are currently part of the UN. Of course, that would be chaos. For this reason, we do not recognize Taiwan, or Kosovo, or South Ossetia, or Abkhazia. And in all likelihood, this principle will be applied to quasi-state entities, which, in our opinion, Luhansk and Donetsk are.<sup>42</sup>

Aside from the worries that the precedent of Russia's invasion of Ukraine may have caused for Kazakhstan, it shares a nearly 7,600-km long border with the Russian Federation and has 3.5 million ethnic Russians among its citizens (second only to Ukraine among the post-communist states), the majority of them living next to the shared border. Kazakhstan's relative assertiveness on the Ukraine war as compared to its neighbors may also be due to the memory of President Putin's remarks in August 2014 during a question-and-answer session of a Kremlin-sponsored youth camp where he said: "The Kazakhs never had any statehood" and while giving credit to Kazakhstani leadership for "[creating] a state in a territory that had never had a state before," he also said that it is to the Kazakhstani public's benefit to "remain in the greater Russian world" – remarks that did not sit well with the Kazakhstani public and government. Some similar statements were made by other political figures, like the Duma member and influential commentator Vyacheslav Nikonov. According to him, "Kazakhstan simply did not exist as a country, its northern territories were basically uninhabited, ...further down south [in present-day Kazakhstan], most of the territories were basically given as a gift to [the Kazakhs] by the Soviet Union, by Russia."<sup>43</sup> Following Putin's statement above, then Kazakh President Nazarbayev decided to refer to the Eurasian Union as the Eurasian Economic Union, excluding the deepening and broadening of its agenda. In March, Kazakhstan allowed a rare anti-war demonstration with 3,000 participants in Almaty. Tokayev has also been one of the few post-Soviet leaders who have spoken to Ukraine's leader, Volodymyr Zelensky, and has offered to mediate between him and Putin.

Despite its negative impacts, the Ukraine war also presents some opportunities for countries that can supply strategic commodities (energy and other natural resources) since Russia has significantly reduced its overall exports, such as grain, cooking oil, natural gas, and crude oil, due to Western sanctions. However,

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<sup>42</sup> Almaz Kumenov, "Russia Blocks Kazakhstan's Main Outlet for Oil Export," *eurasianet*, July 6, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/russia-blocks-kazakhstans-main-outlet-for-oil-exports>.

<sup>43</sup> Vyacheslav Nikonov's comments on the television talk show of Pervy Kanal, Bol'shaya Igra, on December 10, 2020. Bruce Pannier, "An Old Refrain: Russian Lawmakers Question Kazakhstan's Territorial Integrity, Statehood," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 16, 2020, <https://rferl.org/a/russia-lawmakers-question-kazakhstan-territorial-integrity-statehood/31003732.html>.

it is necessary to be cognizant that Russia does not welcome “volunteers” to replace its reduced or boycotted export commodities. This was indicated by Moscow’s reaction when, in July 2022, Kazakhstan offered to increase its oil exports via the Russian port of Novorossiysk, used to deliver two-thirds of its total oil export. Reacting to Kazakhstan’s intentions, a regional court in eastern Russia, in turn, imposed a one-month ban on Kazakhstan’s plans, having allegedly found that the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (made up of eight European, Russian, and Kazakh oil companies) had “committed environmental violations.” The ban had come only a day after Kazakh President Tokayev offered to aid the EU by increasing oil exports as a means of “stabilizing the global energy market.” One analyst estimated the financial loss to the Kazakh economy as a result of this ruling to be worth US\$ 500 million.<sup>44</sup> However, Russia very shortly revised its position, and “an independent court” reversed the decision. This clearly indicated that Moscow contemplated how many of its allies and partners it could alienate and whether keeping them engaged was not the better option. Later, a Ukrainian attack on the port facilities in Novorossiysk affected Kazakhstan’s oil exports. The Kazakh strategy to serve as a reserve supplier of certain commodities and respect the sanctions regime, thus avoiding facing secondary sanctions, worked out.

For Uzbekistan, the most populous Central Asian country and the second-largest economy in the region, the challenge stems primarily from the fact that ever since President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took office in 2016, economic cooperation ostensibly boomed, with an emphasis on large Russian investments funded by Russian credits, including the construction of a nuclear power plant.<sup>45</sup> However, it is open to question whether the resources will continue to be available and whether the projects will be realized in a timely manner. Uzbekistan also contributes a large number of migrants to the Russian labor market. Although the share of remittances in the GDP<sup>46</sup> is smaller than in two other Central Asian

<sup>44</sup> Kumenov, “Russia Blocks Kazakhstan’s Main Outlet for Oil Export; “Russia Reverses Course on Oil Pipeline Needed by Kazakhstan,” *eurasianet*, July 11, 2022, <https://eurasianet.org/russia-reverses-course-on-oil-pipeline-needed-by-kazakhstan>.

<sup>45</sup> Ildar Yakubov, “Opportunities and Limits of Cooperation Between Uzbekistan and Russia,” *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (CABAR)*, July 12, 2021, <https://cabar.asia/en/opportunities-and-limits-of-cooperation-between-uzbekistan-and-russia>; “4th Meeting of the Russia-Uzbekistan Joint Commission at the Level of Heads of Government,” *The Russian Government*, September 18, 2023, <http://government.ru/en/news/49526/>.

<sup>46</sup> Although 4.5 million Uzbek citizens applied for so-called “patents” (work permits) in 2021, only 1.3 million received them. The share of remittances in the GDP of Uzbekistan, bearing in mind it is a country of more than 32 million people and a large economy, is smaller than in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It was 20.82% of the GDP in 2022. However, it oscillated significantly depending, among others, on the value of the rouble. (E.g., in 2015, it was 5.62%, while in most of the last eight years, it was between 11 and 15%.) “Uzbekistan: Remittances, Percent of GDP,” based on World Bank data, [https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Uzbekistan/remittances\\_percent\\_GDP/](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Uzbekistan/remittances_percent_GDP/). It will be interesting to learn whether the war results in increasing demand for

states, the volatility in the Russian economy also affects it. On one hand, the economic contraction in Russia, and on the other hand, the workforce needs of the war and the defense industry impact the Russian labor market. With Russia's economic difficulties and reorientation to a war economy, its partners share some of the problems.

Tajikistan made headlines when the country's president, Imomali Rahmon, expressed criticism of Russia during a meeting with Vladimir Putin and other Central Asian presidents. President Rahmon delivered a complex, approximately seven-minute-long pronouncement emphasizing two key points:

1. The Central Asian states, especially the smaller ones, desire respect and do not wish to be treated as they were during Soviet times when only the Kazakh and Uzbek Soviet Socialist republics held significance in the region.
2. They seek increased Russian investments.

However, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that President Rahmon, who has led a small and traditionally Russia-dependent country since 1994, directly challenged his Russian counterpart. It was more of an embittered appeal, also interpreted as a sign of weakening Russian influence in its neighborhood.<sup>47</sup> The appeal to Russia to invest more in Tajikistan illustrated that several small, weak, and poor post-Soviet states demonstrate a utilitarian approach. This means that a reduction of Russian economic commitment will drive many of them into the arms of other powers, with China in the lead, though not alone. Due to its security deficit and the large Tajik migrant labor community in Russia that provides more than a quarter of the country's GDP<sup>48</sup> in remittances, Dushanbe can hardly afford to have lasting bad relations with Moscow.

Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan remained the least visible, possibly for different reasons. In Bishkek, President Jafarov was on his way to consolidate his power, understanding from the country's history that this could not be achieved without Russia's support or at least its non-opposition. However, he skipped a meeting with Putin to avoid meeting Rahmon due to the ongoing border dispute between the two countries. He also sought opportunities to engage with the US

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foreign labor and whether it will result in increasing supply. Caress Schenk, "Post-Soviet Labor Migrants in Russia Face New Questions amid War in Ukraine," *Migration Information Source* (Migration Policy Institute), February 7, 2023, [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/labor-migrants-russia-ukraine-war](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/labor-migrants-russia-ukraine-war).

<sup>47</sup> For a detailed analysis of the event see Ryota Saito, "The Sense of Distance between Central Asia and Russia Seen from the CIS Summit: The Background to the Rahmon Statement, and Putin's 'View of the Alliance'," *International Information Network Analysis* (Sasakawa Peace Foundation), December 13, 2022, [https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/saito\\_02.html](https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/saito_02.html).

<sup>48</sup> Between 2015 and 2022 the share of remittances was 31.15% on average in Tajik GDP. However, in 2022, among others due to the strength of the Russian rouble, it was 50.95%: "Tajikistan: Remittances, percent of GDP," based on World Bank data, [https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Tajikistan/remittances\\_percent\\_GDP/](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Tajikistan/remittances_percent_GDP/).

despite his regime being certainly less democratic than some of his predecessors. Turkmenistan, on the other hand, remained hidden behind its declared “positive neutrality.”

Most Central Asian states remained carefully disengaged and measured the implications of Russia’s evolving situation, aiming to retain their flexibility to react. As the war continued with no end in sight, the Central Asian states drew their conclusions: Russia would be more absorbed than ever in Ukraine and a broader rivalry with the political West, leading to reduced energy and fewer resources available for Central Asia due to the direct costs of the military conflict and the contraction of the Russian economy. These considerations were reflected at the Cholpon Ata summit of the five Central Asian presidents in July 2022, indicating a response to the changing economic and geopolitical reality. Analysts concluded that “... [w]e see Russia is ceding to China this role as major patron for the Central Asian states. The vacuum will not be unfilled – it will be filled step-by-step by China.”<sup>49</sup> However, it remains uncertain whether this process is irreversible, especially considering that China is facing some difficulties due to an increasingly suspicious and unfriendly external environment and less dynamic leadership in Beijing.

The diminishing Russian influence extends beyond bilateral relations with other independent states formerly part of the Soviet Union. There are concerns about potential spillover effects on organizations established *de facto* upon Russia’s initiative and under its leadership. The two most significant ones are the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian (Economic) Union (E(A)EU).

While the security dependence of other states on Russia increased due to their deteriorating security situations, Russia primarily managed its security relations bilaterally rather than through the six-member alliance without seeking the legitimacy that would come from a multilateral framework. However, within the CSTO, a change occurred when both Kyrgyzstan and Russia canceled exercises, the latter of which would have taken place in Tajikistan. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek cited a lack of protection from the CSTO during border clashes with Tajikistan.<sup>50</sup> Armenia’s withdrawal of its ambassador from the CSTO on September 5, 2023,<sup>51</sup> and its subsequent non-participation in the CSTO summit in November 2023 raised questions about its commitment to the organization.

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<sup>49</sup> Olzhas Auyezov, “‘We Want Respect’: Putin’s Authority Tested in Central Asia,” *Reuters*, October 18, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/we-want-respect-putins-authority-tested-central-asia-2022-10-18/>.

<sup>50</sup> Luca Anceschi, “The Right Distance: Russia-Central Asia Relations in the Aftermath of the Invasion of Ukraine,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 289, November 30, 2022, [https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/86793/ssoar-russanald-2022-289-anceschi-The\\_Right\\_Distance\\_Russia-Central\\_Asia.pdf](https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/86793/ssoar-russanald-2022-289-anceschi-The_Right_Distance_Russia-Central_Asia.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> Yan Shenkman, “Armenia Says Farewell to the Russian Empire – but It’s Not Over Yet,” *Open Democracy*, September 22, 2023, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-coup-yerevan-russia-pashinyan-putin/>.



However, the speaker of the Armenian legislature reassured CSTO partners that “Armenia has not decided to leave the CSTO.”<sup>52</sup> Armenia has often cited Russia’s lack of support during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as evidence that the CSTO does not adequately ensure its security. However, this argument may be considered unfounded, given that Armenia occupied Nagorno-Karabakh in 1993. Indeed, whether the CSTO serves Armenia’s security interests remains a decision for the country to make. While CSTO activities were reduced in Central Asia, they increased in Belarus.<sup>53</sup> As illustrated above, the strong distancing of Armenia and the softer distancing of others like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan indicate a weakening of the CSTO. However, it may be premature to conclude, as some do, that the organization is doomed and will vanish,<sup>54</sup> even if not formally. The future of the CSTO depends on factors such as the duration of the current war and the centripetal forces that drive the parties away from each other.

The EAEU is in a stalemate; its membership has not expanded since 2015. With two of its members, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, representing very small GDPs, the organization remains heavily Russia-centric. This results in economic relations reflecting a “hub-and-spoke” structure. It is highly unlikely that the EAEU could either widen or deepen in the foreseeable future. The EAEU contributes more to the “alphabet soup” in the post-Soviet space than substantive economic integration. Smaller member states are reluctant to adopt a common currency, which President Putin has long nurtured. They are concerned that the value of a common currency would be heavily influenced by Russia’s economic performance, given that it contributes 142 million customers out of the total 182 million citizens of the five members.

## Conclusions

It is widely accepted that the Russian Federation will emerge weakened from the aggressive war it launched against Ukraine. This outcome seems inevitable regardless of whether we can accurately predict the final result. The mistaken assumption that full control over its southwestern neighbor could be achieved through military force has led to losses of historical proportions on various fronts. This has underscored the realization that Russia’s relative strengths, such as its large military force and vast hydrocarbon resources, do not grant the expected superiority. While Russia’s military performance faced challenges and

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<sup>52</sup> “After Pashinyan, Simonyan Also Refuses to Participate in CSTO Meeting; Response from Russia,” *Caucasus Watch*, November 23, 2023, <https://caucasuswatch.de/en/news/after-pashinyan-simonyan-also-refuses-to-participate-in-csto-meeting-response-from-russia.html>.

<sup>53</sup> “Three Military Drills Are Planned in Belarus during This Year,” *Belta.by*, February 13, 2023, [www.belta.by/politics/view/provedenie-treh-uchenij-odkb-zaplanirovano-v-belarusi-v-etom-godu-549880-2023/](http://www.belta.by/politics/view/provedenie-treh-uchenij-odkb-zaplanirovano-v-belarusi-v-etom-godu-549880-2023/).

<sup>54</sup> Mark Temnycky, “The Demise of Putin’s Little Non-NATO,” *Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)*, September 6, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/the-demise-of-putins-little-non-nato/>.

showed some improvement after recognizing the flaws in its grand strategy, it still fell short of the convincing display seen when its forces were merely parading on Red Square. Moreover, the use of force against a friendly independent state raised questions among Russia's friends, allies, and the wider world about whether Russia was indeed the ultimate imperial power, unhesitant to use military force against countries, regardless of their similarities. Additionally, Moscow's willingness to use hydrocarbon resources for blackmail ultimately resulted in interdependence rather than dependence of its customers on Russia, as it faced trouble due to sanctions restricting the export of these commodities to Europe. Moreover, European customers may hesitate to return to the Russian market, partly due to the EU Green Deal, which aims to reduce member states' reliance on hydrocarbons in the long run. These factors contribute to the objective weakening of Russia's position. The perceptual aspect is equally damaging for Russia in the long term: Many worldwide now perceive the country as a reckless actor in international politics, regularly engaging in disruptive behavior. The war against Ukraine has alerted several countries in the vicinity of Russia to exercise extreme caution in their dealings with it.

Russia could pursue a different policy and become a positive global contributor. However, building such a positive profile would require applying a different set of means, a sustained policy, and a readiness to play in the very long run. Building a positive image is demanding and requires a consistent policy. Actually, it is far more demanding than spoiling others' agendas, which it frequently does.

The so-called former Soviet states have observed and responded to the lasting changes brought about by recent events. While they have not completely severed ties with Russia, except for those states with already strained relations, they have pragmatically adjusted their policy orientations and reduced their dependence on Russia. This signifies an acceleration of the natural trend of distancing between Moscow and other capitals that began with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This accelerated distancing will significantly contribute to further weakening the "Russia-centred" nature of the post-Soviet area, fostering increased diversity and initiating processes that diminish its reliance on Russia. Some may liken this phenomenon to "distancing and disengagement on steroids," but perhaps "distancing at an unprecedented pace" captures the essence more accurately. The aftermath of Russia's war against Ukraine will reveal the extent to which the alignments within the post-Soviet space will endure.

It is essential to see that the Russian Federation strongly prefers regime similarity in the former Soviet space. When any of these states adopts a (semi-) democratic system, Russia perceives it as a loss of control. It views such changes as unfamiliar systems to engage with and as potential openings to Western influence. Given that Moscow's alternative offer is comparatively weaker, it makes efforts to prevent or reverse such developments, employing political, hybrid, or even military means when necessary. However, there are several states where Russia may continue to rely on system similarities, such as Azerbaijan, Belarus,

and the five Central Asian states. Therefore, it is more accurate to speak of internal divisions within the former Soviet Union at present rather than a complete shift. This is evident in the, at best, partial adoption of Western values across the region (see Table 2).

This process of disengagement is clearly evident in high politics, particularly in policies closely related to state sovereignty and security. However, it remains uncertain to what extent this disengagement will extend to economic cooperation, where Russia continues to play a significant role, representing more than half of the total combined GDP of the 12 former Soviet states. Only a few states have successfully redirected their external economic relations toward other markets, sources of investment, and creditors. If this trend continues and Russia fails to find innovative ways to overcome the erosion of economic relations, it will face additional costs for its aggression as a spillover effect. Nonetheless, at present, Russia remains a major economic partner for many states, in some cases serving as the primary partner. This is due to factors such as the highly asymmetrical GDP distribution, the stock of investments in several states, and their reliance on Russian-owned infrastructure, such as pipelines (see Table 3). Without gradual changes in this area and the emergence of viable alternatives both in the East (China) and the West, reliance on Russia will gradually decline. Understandably, Russia seeks to avoid such a situation and, in some cases, takes action to counter it. However, it remains to be seen if its attempts will achieve partial success.

**Table 3. Data on the Twelve States of the Former Soviet Union.**<sup>55</sup>

	Territory (km <sup>2</sup> )	Population (2023 – estimate)	GDP (PPP) (USD Billion) (2021)	Share of GDP in the GDP of the other States (%)	Per Capita Nominal GDP (2021)	GDP Growth (%) (2021)
<b>Armenia</b>	29,743	2,989,091	39,613	0.659	14,200	5.7
<b>Azerbaijan</b>	86,600	10,420,515	146,305	2.435	14,400	5.6
<b>Belarus</b>	207,600	9,383,853	184,482	3.070	19,800	2.3
<b>Georgia</b>	69,700	4,936,390	57,434	0.956	15,500	10.47
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	2,724,900	19,543,464	496,126	8.257	26,100	4.3
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	199,951	6,122,781	32,221	0.5363	4,800	3.61
<b>Moldova</b>	33,851	3,250,532	36,637	0.609	14,000	13.94
<b>Russia</b>	17,098,242	141,698,923	4078,000	67.877	28,000	4.75
<b>Tajikistan</b>	144,100	9,245,937	38,058	0.633	3,900	9.2
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	488,100	5,690,818	92,331	1.536	15,000	6.3
<b>Ukraine</b>	603,550	43,306,477	535,579	8.914	12,900	3.4
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	447,400	31,104,937	270,062	4.495	7,700	7.42

<sup>55</sup> Based on data from <https://cia.gov> and author’s own calculations, 27 April 2023.

It is uncertain whether this danger is adequately recognized in Moscow, whether those who are aware of it possess sufficient influence to modify the political course, and ultimately, whether a less performing, contracting, and re-oriented Russian economy with a focus on military production will be capable of addressing this matter in its entirety, or if it will permanently lose its historically closest partners or many of them.

Indeed, it appears that the former Soviet republics that began the process of democratization and westernization before the 2022 Russian war of aggression against Ukraine have been more successful in their disengagement from Russia. These countries likely had a head start in diversifying their political and economic ties, thereby reducing their reliance on Russia.

### Disclaimer

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