



The Impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on the Broader Region

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Program Directors: David Szakonyi and Marlene Laruelle

Editors: Ellen Powell,

PONARS Eurasia
Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES)
Elliott School of International Affairs
The George Washington University
1957 E Street NW, Suite 412
Washington, DC 20052
Tel: (202) 994-6340
www.ponarseurasia.org

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Part I.
Changing Regional Dynamics

The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Eurasian Economic Union

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 888

May 2024

Irina Busygina¹

Davis Center, Harvard University

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) [represented](#) the culmination of Russia's pursuit of regional integration with its post-Soviet neighbors. Although Russia had been negotiating with the leaders of post-Soviet states about a new integration organization since the early 2010s, it was the annexation of Crimea—and Moscow's desire to prevent Russia from becoming internationally isolated in light of Western sanctions—that incentivized Moscow to intensify negotiations. By making significant concessions to smaller post-Soviet nations, Russia managed to motivate the leaders of five post-Soviet states to agree on establishing the Eurasian Economic Union in early 2015. Although Moscow failed in the subsequent seven years to achieve its goal of expanding the Union's membership, the EAEU nevertheless functioned as a limited multilateral format in several economic and financial sectors.

But just as one crisis gave birth to the Union, another crisis could undermine its foundations. At the time of the annexation of Crimea, Russia's ability to make bilateral deals with post-Soviet leaders and motivate them in various ways to join the EAEU represented an advantage: the Union was formed of bilateral arrangements dominated by Russia. Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine—the outcome and duration of which are unclear, and which has triggered the imposition of unprecedented sanctions against Russia—has exposed the weakness of this construct. As the smaller post-Soviet nations reconsider the risks, costs, and benefits of closeness to Russia, the Union's lack of real multilateralism represents a powerful constraint on its development and may even threaten its survival.

¹ Irina Busygina's research focuses on the problems of institutional design during transitions from autocracies, as well as on federalism and decentralization in post-Soviet states. Her most recent book (with Mikhail Filippov) is *Non-Democratic Federalism and Decentralization: The Lessons from the Post-Soviet States* (Routledge, 2024).

Creation of the Union: The “Crimea Effect”

Moscow opened negotiations to form the Eurasian Economic Union in the early 2010s, gradually making non-transparent bargains with potential post-Soviet member states, chief among them Ukraine (as incredible as that now seems). Before 2014, Moscow both offered benefits to and exerted pressure on political incumbents in these countries to encourage them to join the Union, but – generally speaking – without openly [encroaching](#) on the integrity and sovereignty of their nations.

The annexation of Crimea represented an open challenge to the system of international rules and expectations. Moreover, it triggered the rapid launch of the Eurasian Economic Union as a five-nation group (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia). Moscow skillfully used its available levers of influence and pressure – energy dependence (Belarus and Armenia), unfavorable geopolitical position (Armenia), the presence of a large Russian-speaking population (Kazakhstan), and a difficult labor-market situation (Kyrgyzstan) – to incentivize membership. In the process, however, Moscow was itself forced to make serious economic and political concessions. The leadership of potential member countries (primarily Kazakhstan and Belarus) insisted that the Union was possible only as an economic project, not a political one. Then-president of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev insisted that the new organization be known as the “Eurasian Economic Union” instead of the “Eurasian Union.” Since then, the EAEU itself has repeatedly emphasized that its goals are purely economic.

Though the EAEU had relatively strong formal multilateral institutional structures, actual economic and political relations in the Union remained based on highly asymmetric bilateral relations between Russia and other member states. In practice, bilateral arrangements did not merely supplement, “but also often superseded the multilateral framework of the EAEU.”² After 2014, relations between EAEU members [displayed](#) a combination of formally signaling loyalty to Moscow while engaging in various forms of resistance to the growth of Russian influence in their political and public life. The leaders of the smaller EAEU states had serious reasons not to challenge Russian domination openly. In addition to the factors listed above, Russia was a huge market for these post-Soviet states, many of which relied heavily on Russian energy supplies and Russian investments to support their national economies. Moreover, the region’s authoritarian

² Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczuk, *The Eurasian Economic Union: Deals, Rules, and the Exercise of Power*, Chatham House, 2017, p. 11.

incumbents depended to varying degrees on Russia for political support and legitimacy.

Between 2015 and 2022, the Eurasian Economic Union focused on select pragmatic issues, such as a customs union and a single market, while “the more ambitious elements of supranational political integration were relegated to some indeterminate future.”³ Indeed, the EAEU has enabled some internal trade liberalization as well as the movement of people and labor, although it has generally [failed](#) to tackle institutional barriers or promote growth and development policies.

The Implications of the War against Ukraine for the EAEU

The war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine in 2022 has seriously undermined the expressly apolitical nature of the EAEU and its image as a purely economic association. Speaking in May 2023 at the EAEU summit in Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin made several proposals for the further development of the Union. These included establishing the Eurasian Rating Agency, which would provide assessment tools to serve economic activity in the EAEU; creating a climate and environmental club that could synchronize approaches to climate regulation; developing common priorities for technological development and creating technological alliances; and [ensuring](#) freedom of movement within the EAEU, “so that people coming to other states of the union would feel comfortable as if they were at home.”

On top of all this, Putin put forward the idea that the goal of the EAEU was to oppose “Western globalism.” The Russian president called for the Union’s member states to pursue not only their common economic interests, but also common civilizational meanings. Eurasian integration, he indicated, should be [expanded](#) to include ideology, common historical memory, and culture. Thus, even as Moscow claimed that the EAEU’s economic project was developing “according to plan,” the Kremlin simultaneously sought to inject into the Union a different meaning of Eurasian integration that could hardly be supported by the leaders of other member states.

The most important issue facing the EAEU relates to the sanctions that have been imposed on Russia and Belarus over the war in Ukraine. The sanctions have seriously challenged the Eurasian project: according to Davtyan, the EAEU must now not only [consolidate](#) its integration efforts, but also offset or at least mitigate the blow of the economic war. Since the beginning of the “sanctions war,” the EAEU member countries have made significant progress toward dedollarization.

³ Richard Sakwa, *The Putin Paradox*, Bloomsbury, 2020, p. 168.

The share of settlements in the national currencies of EAEU countries has increased from 74 percent in 2021 to 90 percent in 2023.

At the same time, the imposition of sanctions has sharply increased the legal and reputational risks of interacting with Moscow for financial and trading companies that cooperate actively with Western firms. Foreign credit organizations have begun to refuse to accept credit cards affiliated with the Russian “Mir” payment system. In Kazakhstan, given the risk of secondary sanctions, most major banks have likewise stopped servicing cards of the Russian payment system for cross-border money transfers. On March 30, 2024, Armenian banks completely stopped working with the Russian payment system. In early April, a similar decision was made in Kyrgyzstan.

The EAEU countries are well aware that the rules of the sanctions game have changed even compared to five years ago, and the stakes have risen sharply. The vulnerability of member states has increased. Given the growing risks, they are not ready to be exposed to sanctions themselves, a fact that has negatively [impacted](#) the integration of national payment systems of the EAEU.

Country-Specific Implications

While some effects of the war—like sanctions—have affected all EAEU member states, others have been country-specific. This has required Russia to take an *ad hoc* approach to solving such problems. In addition, Russian domestic problems and problems related to Russia within other post-Soviet organizations (like the CIS and CSTO) have inevitably affected the situation within the EAEU.

In the case of Armenia, such issues have led to a complete erosion of trust in Russia. Yerevan believes that Russia failed to fulfill its obligations within the CSTO during Armenia’s conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. In response, Armenia froze its membership in the CSTO. Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan also [refused](#) to participate in a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Commonwealth of Independent States. In November 2023, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan [announced](#) that the Armenian Armed Forces were undergoing large-scale reforms in light of “international experience.” In practice, this entails a departure from Russian army standards. In early April 2024, Mirzoyan said that Armenia seeks to deepen relations with the EU and the US; a trilateral meeting between Armenia, the United States and the European Union was held in Brussels on April 5, 2024. Commenting on this meeting, the Russian Foreign Ministry opined that Western countries [wanted](#) to “turn Armenia into an instrument for the realization of their extremely dangerous designs in the South Caucasus” and indicated that Moscow expected Armenia to clarify its agreements with the US and the EU.

Turning to Kyrgyzstan, the Crocus City terrorist attack (March 2024) has negatively affected the country's migrant workers in Russia. In the wake of the attack, the Russian authorities returned migrants to their home country or kept them in airports. The Kyrgyz consulate urged Kyrgyz citizens to temporarily refrain from traveling to Russia and sent an official note to the Russian side. In addition, a family member of a Kyrgyz diplomat [was](#) injured during police checks of migrants' compliance with the passport regime in Moscow.

In the regions, administrations have banned business owners from employing migrants on patents in many business sectors. Patents must be issued to citizens of countries with which Russia has a visa-free regime, with the exceptions of Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia as members of the EAEU. However, employers prefer not to take risks and thus [avoid](#) hiring citizens of Central Asian countries, including citizens of Kyrgyzstan.

Belarus remains Russia's only full-fledged ally within the EAEU. Like other post-Soviet states, Belarus has always declared itself to have a multi-vector foreign policy. However, the country's heavy multi-level dependence on Russia has heavily restricted its room for maneuver. As Preiherman has argued, given deeply embedded geostrategic asymmetries and with a view to bypassing the structural restrictions of its foreign policy, Belarus [pursued](#) strategic hedging. Minsk chose to hedge to minimize the political and economic risks of relations with Russia, shape Moscow's options and decisions, and increase its strategic room for maneuver. With the outbreak of war, the opportunities for strategic hedging were taken away. Although Belarus has not been drawn into the fighting directly thus far, Belarus has enabled its ally, Russia, to [gain](#) a major strategic advantage in the latter's war against Ukraine. Indeed, almost from the very beginning, Putin made Lukashenka an accomplice in this war.

Conclusion

Can it be argued that Russia's war against Ukraine and massive Western sanctions against Russia have weakened Russia's economic and political position within post-Soviet Eurasia, thereby jeopardizing the EAEU's ability to operate as an established actor in international relations and to expand its list of partners? I believe that such a claim can be made, but it would be too general. It would be more accurate to say that Russia's economic and political position within the EAEU have changed as a result of both external circumstances and smaller member states reconsidering the risks and costs of membership, as well as the prospects of this organization.

In 2014–2015, Moscow’s ability to convince smaller nations to join the Eurasian Economic Union using a mixture of concessions and pressures was an advantage. The Union was created based on bilateral arrangements dominated by Russia. With the outbreak of war, this advantage has become a liability: Built as it is on Russian dominance, the EAEU construction is starting to crack. Moreover, the EAEU does not exist in a vacuum, and tensions between Russia and post-Soviet countries within other common organizations have had spillover effects for the Union.

What Is Considered Extinct May Never Die: The Future of Russia-Led Organizations in Eurasia

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 889

May 2024

Mariya Omelicheva¹

National War College, National Defense University

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has unsettled Central Asia. The governments of these republics have distanced themselves from the Kremlin's military affairs and sought to diversify their diplomatic, security, and economic relations. The uncoupling of these republics' economic and military ties with Moscow seemed to portend the gradual demise of Russia's regional projects: the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Instead of disappearing into the abyss of irrelevance, however, the EEU framework has supported a flurry of economic activity and energy deals in the region. The security and political benefits of the CSTO, meanwhile, have so far remained compelling for the organization's Central Asian members.

The tenacity of "integration" projects in Central Asia defies traditional institutionalist or realist explanations. These initiatives have failed to deepen regional economic integration and mutual collective defense, and Russia no longer wields the kind of decisive economic and political influence that would support them. I argue these institutions are best understood as *risk and opportunity management projects* that benefit ruling elites. If the Kremlin has been able to take short-term advantage of the EEU to circumvent Western sanctions and export control measures, other EEU governments have profited from taking in business ventures that have exited Russia and Belarus, the influx of revenue from parallel trade with Moscow, and their position as [transit hubs](#). Meanwhile, membership in the CSTO offers weapons transfers and anti-terrorism training that help the regimes stay in power. So long as the Russian and Central Asian governments can

¹ Dr. Mariya Y. Omelicheva is a Professor of Strategy at National Defense University with expertise in international and Eurasian security, counterterrorism and human rights, democracy promotion, gender and security, and crime-terror nexus in Eurasia.

repurpose the relationships, processes, and rules of these organizations for their own political and economic aims, these projects are likely to persist.

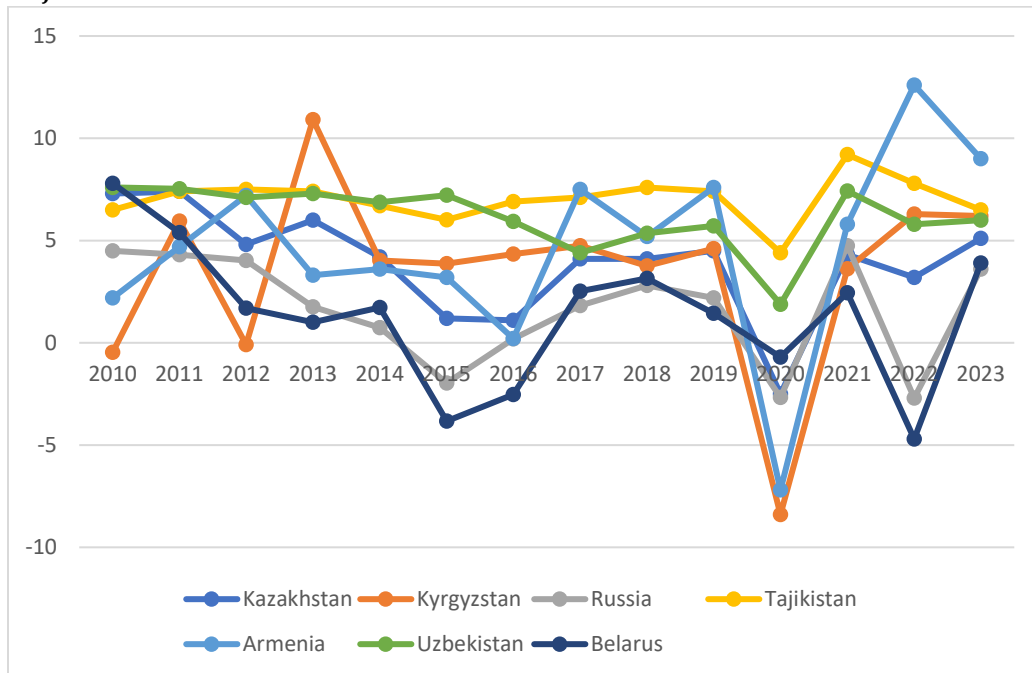
The Eurasian Economic Union: A Cog in Geoeconomic and Geopolitical Schemes

The EEU, comprised of Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan (with Moldova, Uzbekistan, and Cuba holding observer status), faced serious challenges from the start. Rolled out in 2015, the project of regional economic integration and cooperation soon saw a significant decline in trade turnover among its members. Russia's economic crisis, precipitated by Western sanctions in the wake of Moscow's illegal annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine's Donbas, coupled with plummeting crude oil prices, had detrimental downstream effects on EEU members' economies. In the years that have followed, the various protectionist [measures](#) and artificial barriers to trade adopted by the EEU states, along with tariff rate quotas that disproportionately [benefit](#) Russia, have derailed the fulfillment of the free trade agreement. As a consequence, intra-EEU trade [accounted](#) for less than 15 percent of the total trade volume of the Union's members in 2021, in contrast to intra-European Union trade, which accounted for more than 60 percent of its members' total trade.

The unprecedented economic sanctions imposed on Russia in the wake of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine have further disrupted the EEU members' trade and financial relations with Moscow. That being said, the war and sanctions have also created new commercial incentives and opportunities within the Union's structures. With the exceptions of sanctioned Russia and Belarus, the economies of EEU member-states uniformly expanded in 2022, with growth rates ranging from 3.2 percent in Kazakhstan to 12.6 percent in Armenia. All EEU members, as well as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, saw economic growth in 2023 (see Figure 1). Many factors were at play here, including China's reopening after the pandemic and the relocation of Western and Russian businesses to Moscow's neighbors. The EEU, which had previously been a clunky mode of facilitating trade among the Union's members, also offered simplified cross-border rules and practices that proved to be highly adaptive to the threat of secondary sanctions, allowing its members to [trade](#) with Russia in [sanctioned](#) and restricted goods. The EEU countries' exports to Russia grew in 2022 and 2023 (see Figure 2), with exports of certain articles—electronics, mobile phones, cars and luxury goods, nuclear reactors, and even [drones](#)—seeing massive increases despite the fact that no local industries produce them in the volumes exported to Russia. To support this, imports of these same articles from EU countries have [risen](#) during this time; imports from China likewise [surged](#) in 2022 compared to Beijing's exports to other countries.

A new package of sanctions adopted by the EU in December 2023 that [includes](#) a “no re-export to Russia” requirement for all exporters to third countries, as well as the U.S. Commerce Department’s measures to curb the diversion of export-controlled items, may lower the volumes of official exports from EEU member-states to Russia in 2024. While the short-term benefits of reselling goods to Russia may decline and the risks of parallel trade may grow, certain socio-economic imperatives nevertheless look set to [increase](#) cooperation between the EEU member-states, plus Uzbekistan, and Russia.

Figure 1. Annual GDP Growth (%) in EEU Member-States, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan

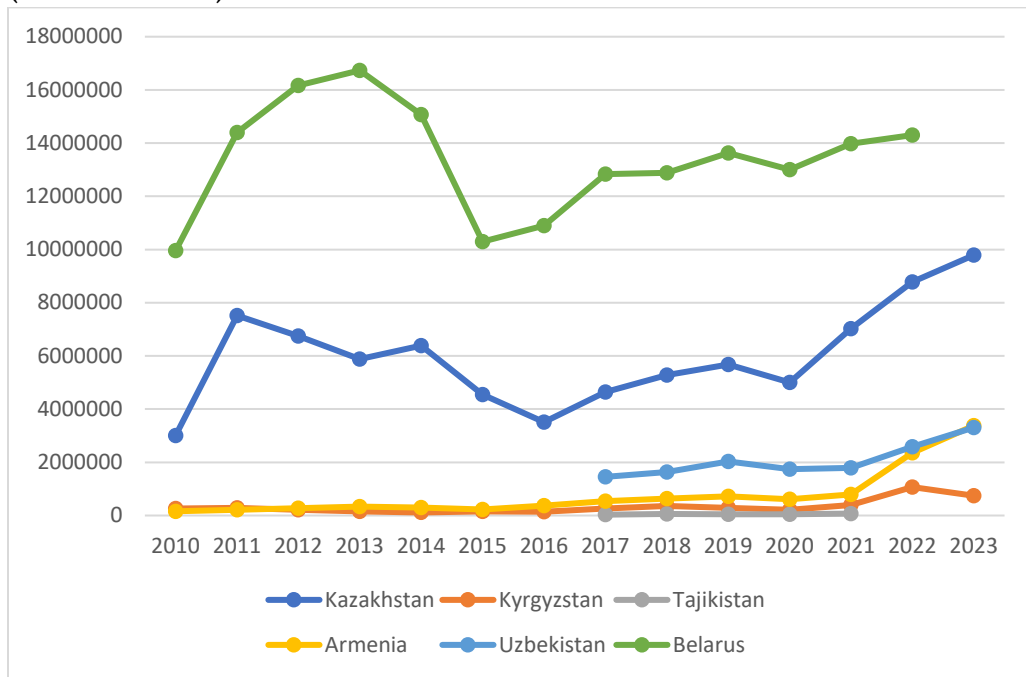


Source: World Bank national accounts data and OECD National Accounts data. Belarus’ 2023 GDP growth is based on official reports by the Belarusian Statistical Agency.

Moscow’s search for new hydrocarbons markets aligned well with the high demand for energy in the Central Asian republics, which had been plagued by power outages and shortages of fuel. Flaunting its cheap energy prices and other incentives to the EEU member-states, Russia [proposed](#) the creation of common gas, oil, and electricity markets within the Union, with some projects including Uzbekistan. While both Tashkent and Astana have denied the establishment of a “tripartite gas union,” Russia’s Gazprom has signed contracts with Kazakhstan for gas transit to Uzbekistan and has been negotiating longer-term contracts for Russian gas transit through Central Asia to third countries. In addition to gas transit and supplies, the Central Asian governments and business elites [reap](#) benefits from the increased supply of Russia’s petroleum products, which are

critical for social stability in the region, and Russian investments in the dilapidated electricity sector.

Figure 2. Exports of EEU Member-States, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, to Russia (US\$ Thousand)



Source: World Bank Enterprise Surveys through World Integrated Trade Solution, <https://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx?lang=en>

There are also longer-term prospects for turning EEU member-states into critical hubs for international logistics and transport. At the end of 2023, the EEU members [announced](#) a permanent pact with Iran designed to facilitate trade between Tehran and members of the EEU by removing certain tariff and customs barriers. In early 2024, the EEU members held discussions with India that [inaugurated](#) formal negotiations over a free trade agreement with New Delhi. The United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Indonesia have been negotiating [similar measures](#). These initiatives are all part of a broader plan for an ambitious transport corridor that would connect Russia’s St. Petersburg to India’s Mumbai through a network of rail links, sea routes, and highways branching out into Asian and Middle Eastern trade markets.

First envisioned in 2000, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) was dormant until the weight of Western sanctions forced a reorientation of Moscow’s trade. The INSTC consists of the three main routes. The Western route

crosses Russia's southern regions and runs via a railway network through Azerbaijan and Iran, going on to Mumbai via sea. The route passes by ports in the Persian Gulf, presenting an opportunity for branching out to markets in the Middle East. It is the most [developed](#) of the three routes both diplomatically and in terms of the quality of the transport infrastructure, and promises significant reductions in delivery time compared to the traditional route from St. Petersburg to Mumbai that runs around Europe from Russia's Baltic sea port through the Suez Canal. The second, Trans-Caspian, route passes through the Caspian Sea by ship and proceeds through Turkmenistan and Iran to India. The third, Eastern, route links the Kazakh port of Aktau and the northern ports of Iran.

The INSTC has clear short- and long-term benefits for Russia. The alternative routes will enable Moscow to continue circumventing Western sanctions and complete its pivot to Indo-Pacific and Asian markets. In the long run, the INSTC will allow the Kremlin to build trade bridges to the Middle East and promote economic growth in Russia's restive southern regions, where large segments of the Russian portion of the INSTC are located.

INSTC routes have also been important to Central Asia. The first cargo shipment from Russia to India via the Eastern route took place in July 2022, and in 2023 the railway companies of Russia, Iran, and Kazakhstan created a new venture to [streamline](#) transport logistics along the route. Turkmenistan has become increasingly [interested](#) in connecting to the INSTC, while Kazakhstan aims to become a transit hub that hosts the intersection of the INSTC and its competitor, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (known as the [Middle Corridor](#)), backed by the US and the European Union. While both projects face considerable [logistical](#) and political [hurdles](#), the Central Asian countries stand to benefit from the political attention, infrastructure investments, and access to new markets that they bring.

The Future of the Collective Security Treaty Organization

Like the EEU, the CSTO—a security alliance comprised of Russia, Armenia, Belarus Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—has been [dubbed](#) a “lifeless, shambling ‘alliance,’” its decline precipitated by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Kyrgyzstan's [cancellation](#) of the 2022 CSTO exercises on its territory in the wake of violent Kyrgyz-Tajik [clashes](#) and Armenia's suspension of its membership in the organization, which Yerevan [blasted](#) as “ineffective” in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh [conflict](#) with Azerbaijan, have magnified internal rifts in the military alliance.

Indeed, the CSTO has never conformed to the ideas of collective security exemplified by NATO. Instead, it has become a vehicle for achieving the diverse

interests of the political and military elites of its member-states, and these interests have often prevailed over the common objectives of the military alliance. So long as the CSTO can benefit the leadership of its member-states and these benefits exceed the risks associated with the membership in the organization, the CSTO will persist – for three main reasons.

First, the CSTO has played an important legitimizing and stabilizing role for its authoritarian members, throwing its support behind autocratic leaders in crisis, as it [did](#) in Kazakhstan during the “Bloody January” events of 2022. As all CSTO members have [seen](#) authoritarian regeneration, the CSTO is bound to be used as a platform of authoritarian solidarity for regimes that eschew meaningful democratization.

Second, following the fall of the first Taliban regime, the home-grown terrorist groups who had found safe haven in Afghanistan were a major concern for the Central Asian governments. Russia promptly capitalized on these anxieties to spearhead counterterrorism exercises under the auspices of the CSTO and the Anti-Terrorism Center (ATC) of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan continue to express concerns about the situation in Afghanistan, while Tajikistan, which supports the anti-Taliban National Resistance front, has acrimonious relations with its southern neighbor. The Central Asian governments have a shared interest in anti-terrorism [drills](#), which remain on the CSTO agenda. The Tajik authorities have called on the CSTO to assist with security challenges emanating from Afghanistan, and a tentative plan for the CSTO to [play](#) a role in defending the Tajik-Afghan border has been under review by its members in 2024.

Third, military cooperation and security assistance under the auspices of the CSTO remain a decisive factor in its continuation. All CSTO members receive military equipment from Russia at highly discounted rates and their officers are [trained](#) at Russia’s military institutions. Moscow is the leading [supplier](#) of weapons and weapons systems to the CSTO countries. Given the makeup of CSTO countries’ weapons inventories, Moscow will remain their major provider of parts and ammunitions for years to come. While all CSTO countries have sought to diversity their security ties through the Partnership for Peace program with NATO, as well as bilateral and multilateral security cooperation initiatives with other countries, their membership in the CSTO has limited their aperture for security cooperation outside the organization.

This combination of material and political gains, limitations on security cooperation outside the CSTO, and a [lack](#) of external actors capable of meeting the needs of CSTO-member governments on terms amenable to the ruling elites contributes to the CSTO’s persistence.

Conclusion

The failure of Russia's institutionalism in Eurasia has not meant the demise of the projects that were ostensibly created to facilitate the political, economic, and military integration of the region. Even "bad" institutions can be sticky. This stickiness lies in the ability of the EEU and CSTO to offer mechanisms to harness opportunities and hedge against risks to their member-states' ruling elites. The traditional institutional deficiencies of these organizations are simultaneously the sources of their persistence, as they allow their members to adapt and repurpose the rules, relationships, and processes developed within the frameworks of the EEU and CSTO to suit the particularistic interests of individual regimes.

To do away with these organizations or fundamentally alter their purpose would require meaningful changes to governance among the members or the emergence of alternatives that would function as opportunity and risk management tools. The US and its Western allies face a major challenge in Eurasia, namely the need to balance their priority of countering Russia's and China's influence with the specific development and integration needs of the Central Asian states and beyond. Subordinating regional goals to U.S. priorities has historically resulted in downplaying good governance, with the result that short-term incentives and disincentives have derailed these countries' longer-term transformation. Regional integration initiatives have suffered from a lack of sustained attention from Western donors and a mismatch between lofty ambitions and the limited financial and political resources put forth to support them. Consequently, the Central Asian governments have been left to navigate complex geopolitical and geoeconomic waters on their own using tried-and-tested "multivector" foreign policies, of which the EEU and CSTO can be expected to remain a part.

Are the Sanctions Working

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 890

May 2024

Peter Rutland¹

Wesleyan University

With Western countries unwilling to commit their own troops, the war in Ukraine has become one of attrition. To that end, leading policymakers as well as many in Western societies have hoped that economic sanctions would force Russia to abandon its effort to conquer Ukraine. Economic pressure, it has been argued, could bring an end to the war by depriving Russia of critical financial resources.

Sanctions unprecedented in scale and scope were [introduced](#) within days of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The initial sanctions [included](#) the freezing of Russian assets abroad and a ban on the export of key technologies to Russia. The European Union [halted](#) direct purchases of Russian crude oil in June 2022 and cut back on imports of Russian gas (although oil and gas exporters were exempt from the Western financial sanctions). Over 1,200 Western companies began [winding down](#) their operations in Russia on their own accord. Some shut down completely, while others just stopped new investment. In the weeks and months following the 2022 invasion, some Western observers [insisted](#) that sanctions were [crippling](#) the Russian economy.

The sanctions have undeniably had a severe impact on the Russian economy. [Certain sectors](#) were particularly [hard hit](#), notably [aviation](#) and [auto manufacturing](#), which saw a 60 percent [decline](#) in output due to a lack of imported components. Overall, however, Russia got through 2022 having [experienced](#) a mere 3 percent contraction in its gross domestic product. Retail sales [fell](#) just 9 percent during the year, with local brands – along with some [Chinese and Turkish companies](#) – replacing Western companies on the domestic market. In 2023, according to official figures, Russia's GDP [grew](#) by 3.6 percent.

¹ Peter Rutland is a Professor of Government at Wesleyan University. He is an expert in contemporary Russian nationalism, politics, and the economy, with over three decades of experience studying Russia and the former Soviet Union.

This memo argues that the most dire forecasts for the Russian economy did not transpire for four reasons. First, Russian energy exports are still reaching global markets. Second, Russia is successfully evading Western sanctions on technology imports. Third, Russia's capitalist economy is more adaptable than many had anticipated. Finally, there is no sign that the sanctions are prompting the Russian business elite or general public to challenge Vladimir Putin's continuation of the war.

Russia's Energy Lifeline

In 2022, Russia was [spending](#) over \$300 million per day to fight the war, but it was [earning](#) \$800 million per day from energy exports. That revenue stream was sufficient to prevent domestic living standards from collapsing and to replenish Russia's stock of arms and ammunition.

The war resulted in a spike in oil and gas prices. Global oil prices [surged](#) by 50 percent, peaking at \$139 per barrel in April 2022, while wholesale gas prices in Europe [increased](#) by 500 percent, hitting €300 (\$320) per megawatt-hour in August 2022. While the volume of Russian oil and gas exports to Europe [fell](#) in 2022, its energy revenues doubled to \$168 billion for the year. Russia [ended](#) the year with a current account surplus of \$227 billion, a record high.

The EU waited until December 2022 to [introduce](#) a price cap on Russian crude. (A cap for refined oil was introduced in February 2023; there is also a cap in place for natural gas should it hit €180 per thousand cubic meters). The delay was due to a desire to mitigate the rise in oil prices, which was hurting consumers—and voters—in both Europe and the US (where congressional elections took place in November 2022). Western insurance and shipping companies were barred from handling Russian oil sold above the \$60 price cap. Russia responded to this measure by [buying](#) a fleet of “shadow tankers” —ships at the end of their life, sailing under dubious insurance from Russian or other sources—and [selling](#) to unscrupulous traders, often with hidden transfers at sea. In fact, forty percent of the 535 “dark fleet” tankers are [registered](#) in the US Marshall Islands.

Oil that had previously gone to Europe is now being shipped to India and China, which means the average tanker distance has gone from 2,862 miles to 9,271 miles, [costing](#) an additional \$10 a barrel. All of this comes out of Russia's profits. Though some insist that the price cap is working, the *Financial Times* [argues](#) otherwise, noting how easy it is for shippers to manipulate the reported price to bring it below \$60 so that they can continue to use Western tankers, insurance or financing.

It is much more difficult for Russia to find alternative markets for its natural gas than for oil, given its reliance on gas export pipelines to Europe. In 2023, the European Union [imported](#) 43 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas from Russia — down from 150 bcm in 2021 —and Russia's share of European imports shrank from 40

percent to 8 percent. Europe stepped up imports of tanker-borne liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Qatar and the US. Germany built the Wilhelmshaven LNG import facility in just 10 months, [getting](#) it onstream by December 2022. Deprived of its European market, Gazprom lost \$7 billion in 2023. China [imported](#) a mere 22 bcm of Russian pipeline gas alongside 7 bcm of Russian LNG in 2022. Notably, China has been [dragging](#) its feet on the approval of a second gas import pipeline from Russia, presumably holding out for a lower price.

Some Western companies have taken a financial hit from the war, but others continue to do profitable business in Russia. Total write-downs by Western firms who have walked away from assets in Russia [exceed](#) \$120 billion. However, some firms have delayed their exit from Russia and are continuing to operate. Leading US oil service firms such as Baker Hughes and Halliburton did not immediately [cease](#) sales to Russian oil and gas companies, making deliveries worth \$200 million in the year following the invasion. Oil service company SLB only cut off supplies in July 2023. In divesting their Russian assets, BP wrote off \$24 billion, and Shell and Exxon each wrote off \$4 billion. They could afford to do this, as these three companies collectively [reported](#) global profits of \$104 billion in 2022 due to high oil prices. The tobacco firm BAT made profits of \$350 million in Russia in 2022; when it finally [announced](#) its withdrawal from Russia in September 2023, it reported a one-off charge of lost assets of \$745 million. The Dutch Peet's Coffee company continues to operate in Russia, where it [made](#) \$452 million in sales in 2022, although it is renaming its brands sold there. In 2021, Starbucks made \$60 million in revenue in Russia, yet restaurateur Anton Pinskiy [acquired](#) all of Starbucks' 130 stores for just \$5 million. Half a dozen Western banks have remained in Russia, such as Austria's Raiffeisen, and they collectively [paid](#) €800 million in taxes to the Russian government in 2023.

The Sanctions Are Not Global

The 49 sanctioning countries [account](#) for 60 percent of the world's economy – but that leaves 40 percent still willing to do business with Moscow. Most countries in the Global South [view](#) the Ukraine war through the prism of great power rivalry. They [see](#) the United States, based on past and current US behavior, as a more direct threat to their own national interests than Russia. Russia benefits from nostalgia for Soviet support for the Third World during the Cold War, which is supplemented by a pragmatic awareness of economic opportunity in the current crisis.

Many of the goods that had formerly been exported to Russia from Europe are now reaching Russia via third countries. For example, Türkiye's trade with Russia [increased](#) by 45 percent in 2022 (\$60 billion in exports and \$10 billion in imports in 2022). Istanbul has refused to comply with EU efforts to halt the circumvention of the ban on selling Russia electronics that can be used in weapons. [Trade](#) between Russia and the UAE grew by 68 percent to \$9 billion in 2022. In the first quarter of 2023, China, India, and Türkiye [increased](#) their collective share of Russian exports from 24 percent to 63 percent. Trade with China [rose](#) 32 percent in the first eight

months of 2023 to \$155 billion. Despite the sanctions, Russia managed to [import](#) \$500 million worth of microchips and \$390 million worth of iPhones in the first six months of 2023.

Between April 2022 and February 2023, India imported \$42 billion from Russia, mainly crude oil, but exported only \$3 billion back to Russia. This means that Russia is [accumulating](#) \$1 billion a month in Indian rupees, which cannot be converted to rubles. It is estimated that over [half](#) of the EU exports to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia are forwarded to Russia. Kazakhstan [imported](#) \$11 billion from the EU in 2022, a 75 percent increase from 2021. While microchips are relatively easy to smuggle in, the main challenge for Russian industry is its heavy dependence on Western [machine tools](#).

In 2022, the average price of [Brent crude](#) was [\\$83 per barrel](#), while Russian crude sold at \$70. By the end of 2022, European countries had [bought](#) \$125 billion of Russian oil and gas, more than the \$50 billion bought by China, \$20 billion by Turkey, and \$18 billion by India. In the first three quarters of 2023, Russia [sent](#) 75 million tons of oil to China—a 25 percent increase over the same period from 2022—overtaking Saudi Arabia as its lead supplier. India and China are buying Russian oil at a discount of \$10–15 a barrel. India refines the oil, and some of the gasoline and diesel is then exported to Europe. An estimated [25 percent](#) of EU oil imports in 2023 [consisted](#) of refined Russian crude.

Saudi Arabia is cooperating with Russia through OPEC+ to reduce the output and boost the price of oil. Cuts [announced](#) in July 2023 and extended a few months later in September (300,000 barrels per day by Russia and 1 million barrels per day by Saudi Arabia) contributed to an increase in the Brent crude price from \$75 in July 2023 to \$87 in October 2023. Each \$1 per barrel increase in the price brings Russia \$2.7 billion in [additional export earnings](#).

Russia's Economy is Adaptable

The tumultuous 1990s taught Russian businesses, consumers, and workers how to [adapt](#) to random shocks, such as the high inflation that wiped out many people's savings and the corporate raiders and tax police who stole businesses. Russian people today are resilient in the face of challenges and resigned to lower expectations.

The ruble was [trading](#) at 92 to the US dollar in May 2024, down 34 percent from January 2023, a rate of decline outstripped only by the Argentine peso, Venezuelan bolivar, and Turkish lire. In October 2023, the government [introduced](#) new rules requiring 43 exporters to deposit 80 percent of their export earnings with the Central Bank of Russia, 90 percent of which it then sells for rubles. (Similar controls had been introduced after the February 2022 invasion before being lifted in July.) In addition, export duties were [introduced](#) in October 2023 (not on oil, gas, or grain) and tied to benchmark world prices, which are expected to bring in \$8 billion in 2024.

The Central Bank of Russia has been [tough](#) in trying to bring down inflation, hiking the interest rate from 7.5 percent in June 2023 to 16 percent in December 2023. The federal deficit in [2023](#) was held to 1.9 percent of GDP. Federal revenue in 2024 is [projected](#) to hit R35 trillion (\$380 billion), of which R11.5 trillion is expected to come from oil and gas. Planned expenditure is R37 trillion (representing a 26 percent rise) with a deficit of 0.8 percent of GDP, with oil projected to be \$71 per barrel and the ruble projected to be at 90/\$. Oil and gas federal income in the [first quarter](#) of 2024 was up 79 percent, while non-oil income was up 53 percent over the same period. Defense spending will be R11 trillion (\$108 billion) in 2024, three times the amount spent in 2021 and equal to [6 percent of GDP](#). This figure is burdensome – but manageable.

The Russian auto industry is [struggling](#), with production [down](#) 50 percent in 2022. Auto manufacturers must now import spare parts that were previously produced by factories in Russia owned by Western, Korean, and Japanese manufacturers who pulled out after the invasion. Other sectors are faring better, with some continuing to export to Western markets. There was a bumper grain harvest in 2022 (158 million tons), leading to record [exports](#) of 60 million tons. Total food exports amount to \$40 billion per year. The atomic-energy company Rosatom [posted](#) \$10 billion in export earnings in 2023 from sales of enriched uranium and construction contracts, up 15 percent from 2021. France [bought](#) \$370 million worth of enriched uranium from Russia in 2022, while the US [bought](#) \$700 million in the first half of 2023. Russia supplies 6 percent of the world's aluminum, 5 percent of its nickel, and 4 percent of its copper, [earning](#) some \$20 billion per year from metals exports. The US barred imports of Russian diamonds, but the G7 has been unable to agree on a global ban, so Russia [earned](#) \$4 billion in 2023 from diamond exports.

Oligarchs and Bureaucrats Remained Loyal

One of the key political assumptions driving the initial sanctioning strategy was flawed. The [theory](#) was that sanctioned oligarchs stood to lose hundreds of millions of dollars alongside their access to Western luxuries and that, as a result, they would persuade Putin to change course to save their fortunes. The problem is that Russia is a [dictatorship](#), not a [kleptocracy](#) (i.e., a country run for the benefit of a corrupt elite). Putin values the power and prestige of the Russian state over the wealth of the Russian business elite. Only a handful of oligarchs have publicly [criticized](#) the war; they know that challenging Putin would mean, at the very least, losing their businesses in Russia.

Around 500,000 people have [emigrated](#) from Russia since the war began, especially following the partial mobilization in September 2022. Those who left include many IT workers, a dynamic that will undoubtedly [crimp](#) Russia's economic growth. At the same time, allowing potential oppositionists to exit the country made it easier to enforce political conformity at home.

The seizure of foreign assets was a golden opportunity for Putin to [reward](#) loyal oligarchs. Since February 2022, Russian businesspeople have acquired an estimated [\\$40 billion](#) worth of Western assets at bargain prices. Vladimir Potanin, the wealthiest Russian on the global [Bloomberg Billionaires Index](#) at number 51, added \$6 billion to his \$31 billion portfolio after [buying](#) Rosbank from Société Générale in April 2022. There are 26 Russians on the Bloomberg list of the world's top 500 billionaires. On the Forbes [list](#), the number of Russian billionaires fell from 121 in 2021 to 88 in 2022 before rising to 110 in 2023 and 125 in 2024 (46 of those 125 are under sanctions). The war also gave the Kremlin an opportunity to [nationalize](#) the assets of some Russians whose businesses are coveted by Kremlin insiders. It is estimated that 180 firms were seized over the past two years, including some large operations such as the Chelyabinsk Electrometallurgical Combine.

Meanwhile, the “liberal” Russian economists [running](#) the central bank and finance ministry – who were pivotal in helping Russia withstand the sanctions – stayed loyal. As the [Financial Times](#) put it, “Putin’s technocrats saved the economy to fight a war they opposed.” In a striking signal of Putin’s faith in the economic elite, on 12 May he [appointed](#) Andrei Belousov, his economic advisor and deputy prime minister, as defense minister.

What Next?

After the war began the Russian government [stopped publishing](#) many aggregate economic statistics, so all the data [must be treated](#) with caution. It is possible that the reality is worse than the available data suggests. The government [projects](#) 2.3 percent growth in 2024, exceeding the IMF projection of 1.1 percent. Russia’s federal budget is under pressure. In 2022, the country had a [\\$47 billion deficit](#) that was covered by the [National Welfare Fund](#), which has [shrunk](#) from \$177 billion in 2021 to [\\$136 billion](#) as of April 2024. However, with a \$50 billion current account [surplus](#) in 2023 and a debt/GDP ratio below 20 percent, Russia is not facing a balance of payments crisis.

The sanctions have [not forced](#) Russia to abandon its war of aggression against Ukraine. David O’Sullivan, EU Special Envoy for the Implementation of Sanctions, and James O’Brien, US *Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs*, [said](#) on an October 2023 panel that the sanctions will last five to 10 years, and that Russia’s GDP will be 20 percent smaller in a few years than it would have otherwise been due to the sanctions. Assuming this to be true, what difference do the sanctions make to Putin’s determination and capacity to destroy Ukraine?

While assessing the costs to the Russian economy, we should also factor in the costs to the European economies. The 2022 energy price shock forced European governments to [spend](#) over €800 billion on subsidies for households and businesses facing unsustainable energy bills—more than five times the total amount of Western aid [provided](#) to Ukraine. This energy shock pushed the

European economy into recession. The EU GDP [grew](#) by an anemic 0.4 percent in 2023, with German GDP shrinking by 0.3 percent. Vladimir Inozemtsev [concludes](#) that “many policies promoted by Western authorities appeared to be more painful to their own economies than to Russia’s – while not benefiting Ukraine.”

As an energy exporter, the US has been insulated from the economic impact of the war. Even so, Republicans in Congress held up passage of a \$60 billion aid package for Ukraine for six months before it was ultimately approved in April 2024. It is not at all clear that Western politicians and publics will be prepared or willing to [sustain](#) economic support for Ukraine at the current level of seven to eight billion USD per month for the next five to 10 years.

Part II.
Geopolitical Impact

Kazakhstan's New Push to the West

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 891

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Nargis Kassenova¹

Davis Center, Harvard University

Since the beginning of the war, Kazakhstan has made a concerted effort to enhance its partnerships with the countries located across the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan and Georgia) and further to the west (Turkey and European countries). Together, they are [developing](#) the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the Middle Corridor. The goal of this megaproject is to establish a multimodal trade and transport corridor connecting Southeast Asia, China, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Turkey, and Europe. In addition to these efforts to improve connectivity by building “hard” infrastructure and enhancing “soft” infrastructure, Kazakhstan is fostering political and security cooperation with Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Kazakhstan's new push to the West has the potential to have substantial implications not only for the country's own national security, but also for the changing geopolitical scene in Eurasia. If the Middle Corridor is successful, the country will be less dependent on Russia; it will be able to realize its potential as a trans-continental transport hub; and it will enjoy diversified and strong relations with the countries of the South Caucasus, Turkey, and Europe. The consolidation of the “Turkic belt” around the Ankara-Baku-Astana-Tashkent axis will enhance Kazakhstan's ability to withstand Russian pressure, which is likely to grow in intensity and toughness in the coming years.

Looking West

Since the dawn of independence, Kazakhstan has been looking west with great hope and enthusiasm. The country's cultural affinity with Azerbaijan and Turkey

¹ Nargis Kassenova is a senior fellow and director of the Program on Central Asia at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University. Her research focuses on Central Asian politics and security, Eurasian geopolitics, China's Belt and Road Initiative, governance in Central Asia, and the history of state-making in Central Asia.

has helped Astana to pursue various political and economic interests. These two Turkic countries and Georgia formed the trans-Caspian transport corridor connecting Kazakhstan to Europe and its lucrative markets. The strategic importance of the westbound route came from the fact that it provided an alternative to the northern one via Russia.

Over the years, Kazakhstan has engaged in multilateral programs and projects and invested in infrastructure projects (ports, terminals, roads, railways, and pipelines) linking it to its western partners. In the 1990s, it became a member of the EU-funded Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia (TRACECA) program aimed at the “revival of the Silk Road.” When the need arose to develop export routes for Kazakhstan’s oil, it set up the national shipping company KazMorTransFlot and started building terminals in the port cities of Aktau and Kuryk. In 2006, Kazakhstan joined the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline project. New revenue streams allowed the national oil and gas company KazMunaiGaz (KMG) to expand its reach, acquiring Rompetrol, a Romanian oil refiner and owner of a chain of petrol stations across Europe, in 2007 and the Batumi port and oil terminal in Georgia in 2008.²

Kazakhstan’s western pivot cannot be explained solely by the appeal of lucrative European markets. Similar to Turkey, the country has a strong Eurasian identity. Deepening relations with Europe is at the core of its state-building project. The idea that Kazakhstan is the bridge between the east and the west guides national strategies and policies. Its openness and readiness to connect and expand contrasts with the isolationist and autarkic stance of Turkmenistan, which has not been won over by the attraction of European markets.

Prior to the war in Ukraine, the Russian factor both constrained and incentivized trans-Caspian connectivity projects, but it was not always decisive. While Moscow was ultimately successful at blocking the development of the trans-Caspian gas pipeline, it is possible to [imagine](#) a different outcome had Turkmenistan been more strategic and proactive. In 2007, when Russia did not want to enlarge the capacity of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) pipeline in order to pump growing volumes of Kazakh oil from the giant Tengiz field to the Russian port of Novorossiisk, KMG and its partners decided to set up the Kazakhstan Caspian Transport System and transport hydrocarbons by large-capacity tankers. Three acquired tankers were, however, eventually [sold](#) after the CPC pipeline was enlarged and companies stopped contracting with the KCTS. The more economical option won the day.

² For more detail, see Nargis Kassenova, “Kazakhstan and the South Caucasus Corridor in the Wake of the Georgia-Russia War,” *EUCAM Policy Brief* 3 (January 2009).

In the Wake of the War

Russia's war against Ukraine has heightened the strategic importance of the Caspian route. During 2022, the work of the CPC pipeline, which carried around 80 percent of Kazakhstan's oil exports, was disrupted four times. In July of that year, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev instructed KMG to prioritize the trans-Caspian corridor. In 2023, KMG [formed](#) a strategic partnership with Abu Dhabi Ports Group to develop maritime and coastal cargo transportation, and tanker and merchant fleet in the Caspian region. The joint venture has acquired two tankers to cross the Caspian Sea and is planning to expand the fleet in the Caspian and the open seas.

These efforts to develop oil cargo are part of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), or Middle Corridor, megaproject. Its goal is to develop a multimodal trade and transport route connecting Southeast Asia, China, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Turkey, and Europe. The TITR began to develop in 2013 on the initiative of Turkey, building on the earlier work of the EU-funded TRACECA program, the Asian Development Bank Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program, and China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The route [increased](#) dramatically in popularity in 2020-2021, with a 52-percent rise in cargo traffic due to the COVID-19 pandemic and disruptions to sea cargo. The war in Ukraine has given a further significant boost to the project, enhancing its strategic importance for the countries along the route.

Over the past two and a half years, there has been a flurry of activities aimed at developing infrastructure, aligning regulations, and reducing tariffs along the route. In 2022, Kazakhstan signed roadmaps with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey to address bottlenecks and develop the Middle Corridor by 2027. In 2023, the national railway companies of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia [created](#) a joint venture to develop multimodal service. In 2024, Kazakhstan's parliament [ratified](#) a bilateral agreement with Turkey that introduced a unified digital document for railway and maritime cargo, a move that has reduced transit times between the two countries from 15 to five days.

Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are also building a fiber-optic cable along the Caspian seabed. This is part of the Digital Silk Way project, spearheaded by Azerbaijan's telecommunications operator AzerTelekom and aimed at creating a digital corridor between Europe and Asia. The cable project is not new, and it was supposed to be completed by 2021. However, prior to the war, its implementation had [stalled](#), since it was hard to find investors in this technologically difficult and expensive project that simply supplemented the capacity of existing land cables

via Russia and China. Today, by contrast, the cable's price is perceived worth paying to hopefully ensure the security of digital infrastructure.

Importantly, the war increased the importance of the Middle Corridor to major international actors, chief among them the European Union. In 2019, the EU [made](#) enhancing transport, energy, and digital connectivity a priority in its relations with Central Asia. The bloc sought to make its own global infrastructure development push (the [Global Gateway Initiative](#)) to rival China's Belt and Road Initiative. In light of Europe's more recent decoupling from Russia and de-risking from China, the Caspian transport corridor is now perceived as useful for the strategic autonomy of the union, fostering EU willingness to invest in the corridor. In 2023, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) [released](#) a study on sustainable transport connectivity between Europe and Central Asia commissioned by the EU, which identified 33 hard infrastructure initiatives and seven soft connectivity actions. And in January 2024, Brussels hosted a big [Investors Forum](#) at which European and international financial institutions committed €10 billion in support and investments to sustainable transport connectivity in Central Asia.

Changing Balance of Power in the Caspian Region

Shifts in connectivity are indicative of the ongoing shift in the regional power balance. Focused on the war with Ukraine, Russia has been losing its position as a power broker and security provider in the South Caucasus. It has taken a hands-off approach in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, including standing aside in 2023 when Azerbaijan launched a military attack on Moscow's ally Armenia that ended with Azerbaijan taking control over Nagorno-Karabakh. A few months later, in April 2024, Russian peacekeepers left Karabakh entirely. Having regained its territorial integrity, Azerbaijan emerged as a formidable regional power that combined military capacity, economic muscle, and strong partnerships. Indeed, comprehensive support from Turkey played a crucial role in Azerbaijan's success in Nagorno-Karabakh, with the result that the victory buoyed the confidence not only of Baku, but also of Ankara.

Turkey's skillful handling of the Russia-Ukraine war has likewise raised the country's international profile. Ankara has been able to maintain relations with all the parties: Russia, Ukraine, and the West. In 2022, Turkey hosted peace negotiations and brokered the Black Sea grain deal that allowed the safe passage of grain from Ukrainian ports. The successful use of Turkish Bayraktar drones during the initial stage of the war raised the prestige of the country's military-industrial complex.

For its part, Kazakhstan must welcome the enhanced profile of these two brotherly Turkic nations, with whom it has enjoyed special relations from the first days of independence. In May 2022, Tokayev [visited](#) Ankara and signed a Joint Statement on Enhanced Strategic Partnership and a number of agreements. The parties agreed to produce Turkey's Anka drones in Kazakhstan and to develop military intelligence cooperation. In August of that year, Tokayev [visited](#) Baku and signed the Declaration on Strengthening Strategic Relations and Deepening Allied Cooperation between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. The three countries have been working to develop their cooperation in the spheres of politics, trade, economics, transit and transport, energy, agriculture, and culture and humanitarianism.

Kazakhstan's desire for deeper partnerships with Turkey and Azerbaijan can draw not merely on shared interests (which have only grown with the war), but also on favorable public opinion. According to survey data from the Central Asia Barometer, in November-December 2022, 31 percent of Kazakhstani respondents had a very favorable opinion of Turkey (compared to 14 percent for Russia and 13 percent for the United States). This makes the Astana-Baku-Ankara axis not only promising, but also sustainable. Tashkent is emerging as another important node, strengthening the Central Asian section of the Turkic "belt."

Conclusion

If successful, Kazakhstan's new push to the west will have substantial implications both for its national security and for Eurasian geopolitics more broadly. A well-functioning Middle Corridor would reduce Astana's dependence on Russia; help Kazakhstan realize its potential as a trans-continental transport hub; and make it possible to strengthen cooperation with the countries of the South Caucasus, Turkey, and Europe. The consolidation of the Turkic "belt" around the Ankara-Baku-Astana-Tashkent axis will enhance Kazakhstan's ability to withstand Russian pressure, which is likely to grow in intensity and toughness.

Belarus and the War: Gradual De-Sovereignization of the Country

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 892
May 2024

Ryhor Nizhnikau¹
Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Alyaksandr Lukashenka's active participation in Russia's aggression against Ukraine has fundamentally weakened his regime and intensified the erosion of Belarusian sovereignty. Already in domestic political crisis following the popular uprising of 2020, the regime is also now internationally isolated. In that context, Russia's influence has increased beyond the critical threshold for maintaining independence. Minsk has doubled down on its unilateral dependence on Moscow and dramatically reshaped state- and nation-building policies. The Belarusian regime is securitizing and militarizing the state while also proactively synchronizing its sectoral policies with those of Russia. Furthermore, it is subjecting Belarusian society to Russian propaganda, with Belarusian identity becoming part and parcel of the "Russian World" ideology.

Ultimately, Belarus' increasing exposure to Russian dominance and foreign policy adventurism has accelerated the country's de-sovereignization. Meanwhile, the West lacks both the will and a viable strategy to engage in a geopolitical competition with Russia and exploit the Lukashenka regime's weaknesses. Thus, the new status quo is likely to be maintained until the end of the war, the outcome of which will determine Belarus' future. In the meantime, the West should aim to connect and ally itself with Belarusian society, which does not support the regime, opposes the war, and is largely European in its values and attitudes. Finding new ways to build the resilience of domestic Belarusian society should be the backbone of Western policy.

¹ Ryhor Nizhnikau is a Senior Research Fellow at the Russia, EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Eurasia research programme at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

The Decline of the Regime's Foundations

In the eyes of some observers, Lukashenka is back on his feet. This year's local and parliamentary "elections" went off without a hitch. His "re-election" in 2025 is guaranteed. Any dissent is crushed; neither domestic opposition nor the West present any viable challenge. Moscow duly offers the political and economic means to sustain the Lukashenka regime. The West and Ukraine are systematically threatened with a military retaliation.

Nevertheless, Lukashenka's power has never been more brittle. The main reason for this is the collapse of the structural pillars that have historically sustained the regime. For over 25 years, his rule was built on three interdependent elements: a monopoly on domestic power, an (informal) contract with Belarusian society, and a special model of relations with Moscow. The political system guaranteed full control over the elite and the state institutions. The state-society contract, which combined a mix of social and security promises, was a bedrock of the regime's popular legitimacy. The model of Belarus-Russia relations not only generated a steady flow of political and economic resources in exchange for geopolitical loyalty, but also insulated Minsk from the Kremlin's propensity for meddling in the domestic politics of its neighbors.

All in all, this gave the regime the (albeit limited) ability to maneuver domestically and internationally. A balanced foreign policy was crucial to preserving the model of Belarus-Russia relations. The merest hint of multivectorism and possibility of improving ties with the West served as a safeguard against increased pressure from Moscow. Meanwhile, Lukashenka's tight control over political and economic institutions allowed him to shuffle cadres, persecute opposition figures and elite representatives alike, and set elite groups up against each other. The ambivalence of Lukashenka's nation-building project, which championed pan-Slavic unification in the 1990s before embracing bottom-up nation-building in the 2010s, enabled it to adjust to societal modernization.

The popular uprising of 2020 and the Russia-Ukraine war have shattered this equilibrium. To begin with, they have left the state-society relationship beyond repair. After the initial shock of summer-autumn 2020, large-scale repressions were combined with a marginal promise of reconciliation, which included an overhaul of the constitution to increase power-sharing. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sounded the death knell to such attempts. Repressions and fear that the war might spill over onto Belarusian soil have become a tool of societal de-mobilization and control. The regime is no longer trying to restore its public legitimacy and shows no intention of making any concessions to or deals with society. Civil society is in tatters and exiled. Any dissent or disloyalty is punished, and each social group is preemptively targeted.

Furthermore, Lukashenka's monopoly on power is broken. The regime no longer enjoys unilateral control over institutions and elites. *De jure*, the constitutional overhaul delegates significant powers – including control over executive decisions and appointments – to the All-People's Assembly and its Politburo. Even if a new formal power-sharing is unlikely to make any immediate impact, the system's informal checks on the elite have been undercut.

The lustration of the state apparatus, the securitization of the state, and the centrality of repressions to the state's survival have substantially elevated the role of the *siloviki* within the system. Cooperation among security agencies, which were originally set up to control each other, has become more coherent and [automatic](#). More importantly, the elite has found a new patron in Russia. Moscow is actively working to expand direct political and economic contacts, integrate elite representatives into its networks, and strengthen both informal and intra-institutional cooperation between key agencies.

Finally, the war against Ukraine and its foreign policy consequences have [destabilized](#) the existing model of Belarus-Russia relations. The West has overhauled its approach to Belarus in response to Lukashenka's triple escalation against the West: an act of air piracy in the EU's air space in May 2021, the creation of the migration crisis on the EU border, and his co-aggression against Ukraine. It has not only imposed heavy financial, economic, and trade sanctions, but also fully ruled out any prospect of appeasement or re-engagement with the Lukashenka regime. The collapse of Belarus-West relations and the erosion of the regime's domestic foundations have deprived Lukashenka of even the theoretical possibility of going against Moscow, thereby facilitating the rapid expansion of Russian influence in Belarus.

Military-Political Subordination

Moscow's role as the main sponsor and guarantor of Lukashenka's political survival allows it to dictate the pace and the scope of Belarus' subjection. Although Russia has thus far chosen not to radically review the political tenets of bilateral cooperation, it has dramatically increased its strategic hold on Belarus.

First, Minsk has lost the ability to pursue an independent foreign policy. It has failed to find a substitute for its collapsed relations with the West. Its ties not only with Ukraine, but also with traditional post-Soviet allies (including Armenia and Kazakhstan) are damaged. Meanwhile, none of the non-Western powers have expressed an interest in developing ties with Minsk that would circumvent Moscow's interests. As a result, Minsk actively bandwagons Russia. Besides traditional [threats](#) to "inflict crippling damage," Lukashenka's regime participates in hybrid attacks against the West. Attempts to deepen cooperation with Tehran

or Beijing are in full accord with Russia's strategic interests. Lukashenka personally admits that his foreign visits are agreed upon and [coordinated](#) with Russia. Minsk also engages with the Russian authorities in occupied Donetsk and Abkhazia.

Second, Russia has deepened its military control over Belarus. Since 2022, Minsk has made a U-turn on core aspects of its defense policies. In January 2022, following the unrest in Kazakhstan, Belarusian troops were deployed abroad for the first time. Besides giving his full support to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Lukashenka has overhauled the constitution to remove any mention of Belarusian neutrality and [permit](#) the stationing of foreign troops and nuclear weapons on its territory. Russia has *de facto* gained a long-sought permanent military presence in the country. The stationing of Russian combat-capable military forces and nuclear-capable weapons in Belarus enables Russia to increase its military and information pressure on NATO and the EU. Even Belarusian military and national security [doctrines](#) now [echo](#) Russia's strategic thinking. Moscow *de facto* controls the extent of the Belarusian army's involvement in the war.

Third, security cooperation has been qualitatively upgraded. Belarusian security officials actively endorse and promote Russian narratives: They defend Moscow's interests and values, admire Vladimir Putin, and support the war. Joint operations have reached an unprecedented scale. Security agencies coordinate and unify their lists of "extremists." Belarusian cyber forces [participate](#) in Russia's cyberattacks on Ukraine. The Wagner mutiny and the Crocus terrorist attack provided further evidence of this collaboration, as Belarusian security forces were [mobilized](#) immediately upon direct order from Moscow.

Finally, the Lukashenka regime is not economically viable without Moscow. It is now wholly dependent on Russia for economic growth and macroeconomic stability. Russia is the only market, creditor, investor, and energy provider. Bilateral trade has [grown](#) from \$35 billion in 2019 to \$53 billion in 2023. Two-thirds of Belarusian foreign trade goes directly to Russia. Fully 90 percent of Belarusian [exports](#) now either depend on Russia's logistics or have Russia as their final destination.

De-Sovereignization of the State

The regime has been evolving in response to these new conditions. It has effectively aborted nation-building in the country. Belarusian identity is confined to the "Russkii Mir" framework and its Soviet roots. Belarusian language and culture, as well as the agencies that historically promoted them, now face significant restrictions. Major cultural symbols are banned. The Belarusian regime

actively borrows Russian conservative policies, [emphasizing](#) traditional values and patriotic education. The Belarusian authorities' new memory policies are built upon the Kremlin's narratives on events such as the Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust, as well as its views on historical figures such as Stepan Bandera. As in Russia, the authorities actively [exploit](#) the alleged "genocide" of the Belarusian people during the war, which has been [enshrined](#) in law. Joint Russian-Belarusian history school and university textbooks are in the making.

State-building has also been altered significantly. Naturally, the war has accelerated the trend toward securitization of the state and its institutions. An active lustration of state and public institutions has cleansed them of anti-regime and anti-Russian groups. This has led, in particular, to the demolition of public institutions, including [scientific](#) and educational ones, that were heavily involved in protests. The army is now [permitted](#) to fire at civilians without warning, while the security agencies enjoy vast powers to fight extremist organizations and individuals.

As arrests and detentions become an everyday occurrence, *siloviki* are taking up a disproportionate number of civil positions in the country's bureaucracy. Judges and public sector employees [face](#) numerous restrictions, including special checks, travel limitations, and rules against holding foreign documents or having relatives abroad. A new law forbids civil servants from expressing a dissenting opinion on any element of a state policy. Furthermore, the state is actively militarizing, as if preparing for war to break out tomorrow: A new mobilization law, regular drills, checks of military preparedness, new military lessons at schools and propaganda campaigns are combined with the arming of pro-government groups.

State policies dictate deeper integration with Russia even in the absence of formal pressure. Russian propaganda dominates the Belarusian media and information space. The special [commission](#), set up in October 2023, is tasked with planning the expansion of exports to Russia and monitoring and incentivizing the realization of these plans. Belarusian private businesses are rapidly [expanding](#) in Russia, which market generated 80 percent of their profits in 2022. Minsk has voluntarily relinquished its tax sovereignty, agreeing to set up a new supranational tax committee to unify the Belarusian VAT and excise tax standards with the Russian ones. Russian companies [acquired](#) 70 percent of those business assets that chose to leave the Belarusian market due to the Western sanctions in 2021-2023.

Conclusion

Gradual de-sovereignization of Belarus to guarantee his political survival is the new modus operandi of the Lukashenka regime. The Lukashenka-Putin tandem's control over Belarus will largely remain intact until the end of the war. Meanwhile,

Western ability to influence developments in Belarus remains limited. Nevertheless, the West has a strong potential ally in Belarusian society. The latter does not support the regime, opposes the war, and is largely European in its values and attitudes. Western policy should therefore aim at allying with Belarusian society and increasing society's resilience. The West should enhance pressure on the regime and, specifically, create new means of counteracting Russian information dominance inside the country. Finding ways to engage Belarusian society and offering an alternative to Moscow should be the backbone of Western policy.

From Crisis to Catalyst: The Impact of Russia's War on Moldova's Domestic and Foreign Policies

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Igor Zaharov¹

Carolina Bogatiuc

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked a pivotal moment in European geopolitics, drawing widespread condemnation and reshaping the security, economic, and political landscape of the region. Moldova has found itself at the forefront of this crisis – indeed, it has been the second most affected country behind Ukraine itself.

While the war has forced Moldova to confront multiple challenges and crises, it has also served as a catalyst for profound changes in the country's domestic and foreign policies. Facing the humanitarian, economic, security, and energy challenges posed by the invasion of Ukraine, Moldova transformed EU accession into an overarching national priority. The government has actively [pursued](#) the reforms required for EU accession and implemented all recommendations made, demonstrating a commitment to democratic principles, rule of law, and economic modernization. With support from the EU, Moldova has found a way to handle the influx of refugees, enhanced economic connectivity with the EU, managed the security situation around the separatist region of Transnistria, and diversified its energy sources away from Russia. The country has substantially improved its position on numerous democracy indices and is working diligently to prepare for the EU accession negotiations. Seen from Moldova, EU membership is understood not just as a strategic choice, but as a vital step toward securing the country's future. The country is also keen to contribute to strengthening Europe as a whole.

¹ Igor Zaharov served as communications adviser to former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Moldova Nicu Popescu. Carolina Bogatiuc served as chief of staff to former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Moldova Nicu Popescu.

Challenges Facing Moldova in the Wake of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Since the Russian invasion, Moldova has confronted multiple crises that have tested its resilience and adaptability. First came the humanitarian crisis: Moldova was prepared to host 30,000 refugees but instead [saw](#) an influx of almost 1 million people, with around 100,000 refugees remaining in the country. This unexpected surge posed significant challenges in terms of providing adequate shelter, food, and healthcare. Accordingly, Chişinău [declared](#) a 60-day state of emergency and fully closed its airspace for nearly a month. The state of emergency, which was supposed to last 60 days, persisted until December 30, 2023, underscoring the profound repercussions of Russia's incursion into Ukraine on Moldova.

Economically, the war has exacerbated existing challenges, impacting trade routes, inflating prices, and straining resources. Moldova's economy, which is heavily reliant on agriculture and remittances, has faced severe disruptions. The year 2022 was particularly challenging: the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell by six percent, a stark indicator of the economic turmoil unleashed by the geopolitical tensions in the region. Inflation [soared](#) to an alarming 34 percent, dramatically increasing Moldovans' cost of living and putting immense pressure on the national economy. Today, Moldova's economic situation is showing signs of improvement, thanks to both domestic efforts and international assistance. While challenges remain, the economy is gradually recovering, with projections of three-percent GDP growth in 2024.

In 2022, Moldova suffered its worst energy crisis since independence. Prior to the war, the country was almost entirely dependent on Russian energy. In 2022, however, Gazprom delivered less than half the amount of natural gas stipulated in the relevant supply contracts and instituted a four-fold price hike for gas supplies to Moldova, leading to a sharp spike in inflation. Compounding the problem, in early October, as a result of a mass bombing campaign carried out by Russia against Ukrainian civilian and energy infrastructure, Ukraine became unable to export electricity to Moldova. On October 24, this provoked an electricity deficit in the country. Some regions [faced](#) short-term blackouts and Moldova began importing electricity from Romania. Security concerns have also increased, with missiles violating Moldovan airspace and increased risks of illegal border crossings, arms and drug smuggling, and human trafficking.

Nor is Moldova only facing external challenges. Indeed, the country is grappling with domestic strife, much of which is linked to Russia's influence through proxies. At the heart of these difficulties is a hybrid warfare strategy designed to destabilize and manipulate, featuring tactics that range from disinformation campaigns to cyber-attacks. This turmoil is linked in large part to the activities of fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, who is currently evading justice in Israel. Shor has been

involved in [financing](#) paid protests in Moldova with a view to undermining the government and its pro-European Union trajectory. Such events not only create a climate of fear and uncertainty that disrupts daily life, but also place undue strain on the country's security services, diverting attention from other critical issues.

One common narrative pushed through such disinformation campaigns is that Moldova's aspirations to EU integration and potentially NATO membership would lead to economic ruin, the loss of national sovereignty, and compulsory involvement in military conflicts. These narratives aim to instill fear and opposition to Western integration among the Moldovan public and ultimately derail Moldova's pursuit of EU integration, keeping Moldova within Russia's sphere of influence.

On February 9, 2023, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky [said](#) that Ukrainian intelligence had intercepted plans by Russian intelligence to overthrow the democratically elected government of Moldova and establish control over the country. The allegations were subsequently corroborated by Moldovan intelligence. On February 13, Moldovan President Maia Sandu said the authorities had [confirmed](#) the existence of such a plot and revealed the details thereof. She said the coup plan envisioned using saboteurs with military training dressed in civilian clothes to stage attacks (including on state buildings) and take hostages. The Moldovan government was to be overthrown and replaced with a puppet government. The plan allegedly involved an alliance between criminal groups and two exiled Moldovan oligarchs. On February 21, Prime Minister Dorin Recean [declared](#) that Russia had tried to bring the Chişinău airport under its control in order to bring in Russian and pro-Russian diversionists to overthrow the government. Eight months after the alleged coup, President Sandu [said](#) that the Wagner Group and its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, had been directly involved in the coup plot.

Handling multiple crises simultaneously proved to be a daunting challenge. Yet amid these difficulties, Russia's aggression demonstrated that EU integration is the sole path for Moldova. Moving toward EU integration is not merely a strategic choice but a vital step in solidifying the democratic advances Moldova has made since gaining independence. Moreover, it represents a commitment to fostering regional stability and security.

Navigating Turbulence: How Moldova Successfully Managed These Multiple Crises

Moldova's response to these crises was multifaceted, demonstrating resilience and strategic realignment toward European integration. Diversification of energy sources was a key strategy, enabling Moldova to navigate its first winter

(2022/2023) without Russian gas and electricity. International support and solidarity—both through the [Moldova Support Platform](#), co-created by Germany, France and Romania, and otherwise—were crucial. Moldova addressed the humanitarian crisis by providing support to refugees, strengthened its cybersecurity to counter hybrid threats, and maintained stability in politically sensitive regions such as Gagauzia, as well as in the separatist region of Transnistria, which is internationally recognized as a part of Moldova. Economic and social measures were implemented to mitigate the economic impact of the crises, supported by international financial aid and investments in critical infrastructure to boost economic resilience.

These crises catalyzed Moldova’s EU integration process, transforming EU accession into an overarching national priority. Moldova’s support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression highlighted Chişinău’s alignment with European values and security interests. The government has actively [pursued](#) the reforms required for EU accession and implemented all recommendations made, demonstrating a commitment to democratic principles, rule of law, and economic modernization.

On June 23, 2022, against the backdrop of the war, both Moldova and Ukraine [obtained](#) candidate status. On December 14, 2023, the European Council [decided](#) to open accession talks with Moldova and Ukraine.

As a candidate country, Moldova has stepped up its contribution to a stronger Europe. The country successfully hosted the second European Political Community Summit; has continued strengthening security and defense cooperation with EU counterparts, especially through the European Peace Facility; and [expedited](#) the launch of the EU Partnership Mission (EUPM). Moldova’s growing contributions to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and United Nations (UN) missions underscore its commitment to global peace and security.

In 2023, Chişinău significantly increased its alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), reaching a cumulative alignment rate of 89.2 percent, up from 64.2 percent in 2022. This entailed aligning with 13 new EU sanctions regimes, such as the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, and three specific sanctions regimes related to Russia’s actions in Crimea and Ukraine. The country has also adopted a new framework for international development aid. Moreover, Moldova’s dedication to regional cooperation and humanitarian support is exemplified by the provision of aid to Ukraine, the establishment of Solidarity Lanes, and the opening of new border crossings with Romania and Ukraine.

Upholding Peace While Bolstering Democracy

The government has maintained peace and stability in the country by carefully managing the situation around the separatist region of Transnistria, which has become part of Russia's information war. In February 2024, as Moldova braced for a pivotal electoral year—featuring both the presidential election and a referendum on European integration slated for October—the separatist regime in Tiraspol [convened](#) the 7th “congress” of so-called “deputies of all levels.” Contrary to what was rumored in the international press, the final text of the resolution did not include a request for Russian President Vladimir Putin to annex Transnistria to Russia. However, the adopted document does contain “an appeal” to the State Duma and Federation Council of Russia, as well as such international organizations as the UN and OSCE, “to take diplomatic measures aimed at protection” of the Transnistrian region against “Moldova’s pressure.” Such requests for Russian aid are nothing new: In the last two years, the Tiraspol regime has appealed to the Kremlin at least three times. Moldova’s success in maintaining peace in the Transnistrian region showcases its commitment to a peaceful resolution.

Amid these challenges, Moldova has tackled the insecurity surrounding gas and electricity supplies, thereby ensuring the well-being of the country’s citizens. The country has been transforming its energy sector at great speed. In the last year, the country has moved away from its former complete reliance on Russian gas and now buys all gas needed for heating from other suppliers. Joint purchases of gas with EU countries, the synchronization of the country’s electricity networks with the EU, and work on new electricity connections to Romania are all making Moldova more resilient. The nation’s continued integration into the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E), significant gas reserves, and progress in the field of renewable energy highlight its commitment to a greener and more sustainable future.

In the economic sphere, Moldova has effectively addressed high inflation rates, which have now [decreased](#) to 5 percent (from 34 percent in 2022). The country has embarked on a transformative journey by participating in the EU internal market program, [signing](#) a new free trade agreement with the EFTA, signing an agreement on reducing roaming charges with the EU, enhancing connectivity, and promoting economic growth.

One of Moldova’s standout accomplishments in this period has been its significant improvements on democratic rankings. For instance, Moldova now [ranks](#) 28th out of 180 countries on the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) index, a remarkable improvement of 63 positions since 2020. Similarly, in the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, Moldova [ranks](#) 76th out of 180

countries, a notable improvement of 39 positions since 2020. Additionally, in the Global Gender Gap Report, Moldova currently [occupies](#) the 19th position out of 146 countries. These developments highlight Moldova's unwavering dedication to upholding democratic principles and fostering transparency within its governance.

The most significant indicator of Chişinău's ambition and commitment is its unwavering preparation for EU accession negotiations. The country has accelerated its efforts by establishing 35 working groups for each negotiation chapter, an effort that has involved over 600 civil servants. In October, the Government approved the National Action Plan for the Republic of Moldova's Accession to the European Union for the years 2024-2027. The Bureau for European Integration was [established](#) within the State Chancellery of Moldova, led by a Deputy Prime Minister who is also the country's chief negotiator for EU accession. Moldova has [fulfilled](#) eight of the nine recommendations of the European Commission and made significant progress on the remaining action. The country has now commenced the screening process and is diligently working to initiate formal negotiations through the first EU-Moldova Intergovernmental Conference, which is slated to take place by the end of June 2024.

Conclusion

In navigating the multifaceted domestic and international challenges posed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moldova has demonstrated resilience and determination. While the conflict has underscored Moldova's vulnerabilities and the complexities of its security landscape, it has also served as a catalyst for profound changes, pushing the nation toward deeper integration with Western democracies and reinforcing its commitment to EU accession. Moldova's response to these crises reflects its unwavering dedication to democratic principles, economic modernization, and regional stability: EU membership is understood not just as a strategic choice, but as a vital step toward securing the country's future. Keeping a close eye on Moldova's political scene will be instructive, especially as the country gears up for two significant democratic events—the presidential elections and an EU integration referendum, both slated for the latter part of October—that will present Moldovans with the opportunity to clearly express their aspirations regarding EU membership. Meanwhile, Russia's attempts to sway Moldova from this course underscore the critical need for vigilance among the Moldovan public and authorities alike.

Escaping Russia's Death Grip: How Has Putin's Aggression in Ukraine Affected Security in Armenia and Karabakh

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Nona Shahnazarian¹

*Institute of Archeology and Ethnography, Armenian Academy of Sciences, Yerevan;
Center for Independent Social Research Armenia, NGO*

This memo touches on the geopolitical complexities surrounding Azerbaijan's conflict in Karabakh and Armenia between 2020 and 2023, positing that Russia under Putin's leadership has initiated a proxy war against Armenian democracy akin to its war with Georgia in 2008 and all-out invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In other words, Russia's proxy war in Karabakh beginning in 2020 is just one fragment of an overarching strategy aimed at constructing a USSR 2.0. Putin's Russia has strategically used regional conflicts to assert its influence and undermine democratic movements abroad. With the Karabakh conflict, Russia has leveraged its historical ties and military presence in the region order to advance its political agenda.

The conflicts in Karabakh (2020–2023) and Armenia (September 2022–present) should be viewed as proxy wars orchestrated by Russia. By arming and supporting Azerbaijan (including by permitting Turkey to gain a foothold in the South Caucasus), Russia has sought to destabilize Armenia, a country that has shown significant signs of democratic progress. This tactic mirrors Russia's approach in Ukraine, where it has backed separatist forces to undermine the country's pro-Western government.

¹Nona Shahnazarian is Associate Researcher at The National Academy of Sciences, Yerevan, Armenia and head of Center for Independent Social Research Armenia, Yerevan. She has conducted extensive fieldwork in Russia, Armenia, Georgia, the USA and Nagorno-Karabagh and has published on the issues of gender, war, migration, memory, and diaspora in the Caucasus and Russia.

The Karabakh Conflict and Armenia's Shifting Alliances

Russia's historical ties to the Caucasus region date back to imperial times, and history has played a significant role in its involvement in the Karabakh conflict. Karabakh has served – and continues to serve – as a tool through which Russia can assert its dominance and expand its sphere of influence in the region in line with its imperialist ambitions.

The 2018 Velvet Revolution, like any other revolution, was a nightmare scenario for Putin. It represented a significant shift in Armenia's political landscape by challenging the entrenched regime – the leaders of which all had Karabakh roots – that had been in place since 1998. However, the subsequent flare-up in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in 2020 exposed underlying tensions and geopolitical maneuvering with serious implications for regional stability and Russian influence.

The 2018 election of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, a non-Karabakhi, initially signaled a thaw in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. However, the new political opposition – former representatives of the oligarchic authority – soon initiated a campaign [smearing](#) Pashinyan as a traitor who came to hand over Karabakh. These tensions were ignited in July 2020 by Azerbaijan's escalation of the conflict, a move fueled by domestic pressures in Azerbaijan, most notably economic and social strains exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and government crackdowns on dissent.

Russia has historically played a multifaceted role in the conflict, employing economic tools like the Eurasian Union and military-strategic alliances like the CSTO to exert influence in the region. With the 2020 crisis, however, Moscow diverged from its traditional alignment with Armenia, opting instead for the mediator role that it had sought since 1994. This step implies that Azerbaijan had received permission for the attack from Russia, only violating the indefinite truce after having secured the consent of the main player. When paired with Azerbaijan's military support from Turkey, this new dynamic upended the status quo that had existed in the South Caucasus since 1994, along the way diminishing Russia's leverage and altering the regional balance of power.

Despite Moscow's historical ties and security commitments, Russia's intervention in the 2020 conflict failed to effectively uphold its peacekeeping commitment, which included maintaining control over the Lachin corridor, a vital link between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, as stipulated in the agreement negotiated by the Kremlin to end hostilities. Moreover, Russia vacated its obligation to defend Armenia's security. Indeed, Russia and the CSTO expressed no concern about Azerbaijan's subsequent violation of Armenia's territorial integrity in September 2022. The Kremlin's reluctance to intervene decisively undermined Armenia's trust in its longstanding ally. In a

clear sign of the shifting geopolitical dynamics, Armenia [has frozen](#) its membership in the CSTO and sent an official letter to Moscow asking it to remove its FSB-based border guards from Zvartnotz International Airport in Yerevan.

The Evolution of Russia's Popularity in Armenia: From Savior to Scapegoating

The historical relationship between Armenia and Russia has been complex, shaped by geopolitical realities and shared cultural ties. However, the events surrounding the 2020 war between Azerbaijan and the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) marked a turning point in Armenia's perception of its erstwhile ally. The reasons driving Russia's former popularity in Armenia ultimately lost their rationale, resulting in a decline in support among Armenians starting in 2020.

Russia's historical popularity in Armenia was initially based on pre-modern religious resistance. In the early 19th century, religious identity mattered significantly more than national or ethnic identity. Hence, the fact that Russia was a Christian country proved important for Armenia, since the Persian and Ottoman Empires were predominantly Muslim and exercised severe discrimination towards non-Muslims. Having been situated on the frontier of three empires (Russian, Persian, and Ottoman) for centuries, Armenia has faced existential threats as a Christian enclave amid Islamic neighbors. In this context, Russia emerged as a key ally, a bulwark against external aggression by Azerbaijan and Turkey and a protector of Armenian interests. Historical narratives portrayed Russia as Armenia's savior from "Turkish yataghan" as well as religious, social, and political oppression (in particular from the Ottoman Empire), fostering a sense of gratitude and loyalty among Armenians.

The 44-day war in 2020 – orchestrated by Azerbaijan with Turkish support and tacit Russian approval – shattered Armenia's illusions of Russian benevolence. As Russian weaponry and diplomatic maneuvering favored Azerbaijan, Armenia viewed Russia's role with rising suspicion and resentment. The war served as an eye-opener, revealing Russia's pragmatic geopolitical calculations at the expense of Armenian interests.

The conflict exposed the fallacy of Russia's historical narrative as Armenia's savior. The notion of Russia as a protector from Turkish threats crumbled in the face of its alignment with Turkey and Azerbaijan. One instance of graffiti in post-2020 Yerevan captured the sentiment succinctly: "Russians are white Turks." This symbolic rejection of Russia's perceived role as a defender highlighted the disillusionment felt by many Armenian citizens.

Despite the clear shift in Armenia's perception of Russia, academic research on this phenomenon remains limited. Russian think tanks have conducted

sporadic studies on the topic, but there has yet to be a comprehensive analysis of the decline in Russia's popularity among Armenians. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence and public sentiment point to a significant and enduring shift in Armenians' attitudes toward Russia.

This sharp decline following the 2020 war reflects a broader disillusionment with Russia's perceived role as a protector and an ally. In the face of mounting pressure from Azerbaijan and perceived indifference from Russia, Armenia took proactive steps to mitigate tensions by inviting EU representatives to monitor the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. Since the inception of the European observation mission, Azerbaijan has refrained from further provocations, and not a single Armenian border guard has lost their life in border skirmishes.

However, the presence of the EU monitors on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border has irked both Russia and Azerbaijan, which accuse Armenia of introducing a new actor into the region, and neglecting the fact that, during the 44-day war in 2020, Azerbaijan invited Turkey and Russia to establish a presence in Nagorno-Karabakh. As representatives of Russia, Maria Zakharova and Sergei Lavrov have issued veiled threats to Armenia, expressing discomfort with the prolonged presence of the EU mission. They allege that Armenia reneged on its promise to limit the mission's duration to two months, creating friction amid regional dynamics that were already fragile.

Earlier, Armenia's move to seek a Constitutional Court review of the compatibility of the Rome Statute with its own constitution was intended to leverage the International Criminal Court (ICC) against Azerbaijan, which has not signed the statute. This step, driven by Yerevan's desire to bolster deterrence against Baku, was [facilitated](#) by constitutional changes that have been implemented since 2004. However, the ICC's arrest warrant for Putin complicates Armenia's parliamentary ratification due to potential obligations to arrest Russia's leader. In response to this move, Moscow swiftly criticized Armenia's decision and imposed a ban on dairy imports, reminiscent of its actions against Georgia in 2006. Despite Armenia's limited dairy exports to Russia, the ban harms rural Armenians economically.

This situation underscores the strategic balancing act that Armenia plays between its European aspirations and its historical ties with Russia. As Armenia navigates these complex geopolitical currents, it must tread carefully to safeguard its national interests while maintaining regional stability.

Armenia-Azerbaijan Relations: Western Scrutiny, Russian Alliance, and the Quest for Peace

Efforts to resolve Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions, particularly those concerning the matter of Nagorno-Karabakh, have garnered significant attention on the

international stage in recent years. A series of events—including hearings in the U.S. Senate, decisions by the International Court of Justice, and sessions of the OSCE PA—underscore the heightened level of scrutiny to which Armenia has been subjected.

Yerevan's proactive official engagement with the European Union signals its readiness to align closer with European integration, prompting increased attention from the West. Western powers perceive an opportunity to bolster their influence—and, in turn, diminish Russia's presence—in the region by supporting Armenia. The West is troubled by hybrid attacks by the Kremlin against Armenia (e.g., the use of ethnically Armenian envoys from Russia to overthrow legitimate authority in Armenia, the manipulation and instigating of Karabakhi IDPs against the government of Nikol Pashinyan) as well as the slow pace of peace negotiations, prompting efforts to strengthen Armenia's position and encourage constructive engagement from Azerbaijan.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James O'Brien's remarks during U.S. Senate hearings underscore the US's critical stance towards Azerbaijan and its commitment to peace negotiations. While the U.S. has refrained from imposing sanctions on Azerbaijan (which has acted as a proxy for the sale of Russian oil and gas), its warnings of consequences for obstructive behavior have exerted significant pressure on Baku. Azerbaijan's response has been largely in the form of continued disagreements. For example, its reluctance to participate in negotiated meetings on Western platforms (e.g. the five-way meeting in Granada) and its rejection of various proposals point to a sense of discomfort with Western scrutiny. However, Armenia's submission of peace proposals, and the subsequent positive responses from Baku, are indicative of ongoing efforts to address disagreements and advance negotiations.

Both the U.S. and the EU demonstrate a keen interest in facilitating direct negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite several failed meetings, the parties have continued to exchange proposals through indirect channels. Still, the potential for peace would be minimal without Western support. Armenia's proposed "crossroads of peace" (seen in contrast in Russia's and Turkey's backed Azerbaijani demand for a Zangezur "corridor", that is, extraterritorial road links through the Syunik Province in Armenia) have received positive feedback from Western nations, suggesting the potential for economic benefits and regional stability. Moreover, the West views the conclusion of a peace agreement as critical to the weakening of Russia's influence in the region, signaling its support for a negotiated settlement.

Azerbaijan has long derided Armenia as Russia's staunch ally at both the international and domestic levels. However, recent developments have challenged this narrative. While Armenia was once stigmatized for its perceived closeness to Moscow, Azerbaijan now agrees that Russia is

obstructing peace efforts in the region. This rhetorical shift highlights a complex interplay of geopolitical interests and strategic maneuvering.

The notion that Nagorno-Karabakh served as a tool for Russia's dominance over Armenia (a dominance that ceased to exist following the September 2023 ethnic cleansing campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijani military forces with the tacit support of Russia and its "peacekeepers") has given way to a broader understanding of Moscow's leverage in the region. The newly identified problems of demarcation-delimitation, "Azerbaijani exclaves" (with no mention of Armenian exclaves in Azerbaijan), the "salami-slicing" tactic implemented during the seizure – one after another – of bordering Armenian villages in both Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia proper, as well as the concept of "Western Azerbaijan" (which implies the elimination of the Armenian state) all underscore Russia's multifaceted approach to exerting influence in the region. These tactics not only challenge Armenia's territorial integrity but also undermine its sovereignty on the international stage.

Notably, the Azerbaijani maximalist stance has repercussions for Russia's geopolitical strategy. Russian ultra-nationalists have historically opposed Armenia's alignment with the West, viewing it as a threat to Moscow's hegemony in the Caucasus. The coercive tactics employed by Russia – communicated through Azerbaijan – underscore the intersection of their geopolitical interests. The episode in 2013, in which Armenia's pursuit of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU was met with threats by Russian ultra-nationalists, exemplifies this dynamic. Armenia became a member of the Eurasian Economic Union overnight. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent sanctions, three dictatorships – Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey – have grown closer, united by ideological and (shadow) economic interests. In light of these developments, the question arises: Who truly is the conveyor and ally of Russia's interests? The shifting dynamics underlying Armenia-Azerbaijan relations raise doubts about Russia's commitment to the Armenian side, especially given the "velvet" revolutionary government in Armenia compared to the familiar Aliyev dictatorship. Azerbaijan's accusation that Armenia seeks peace guarantors beyond the region and the tactics of both Russia and Azerbaijan suggest that a more complex geopolitical calculus is at play.

The evolving alliances and strategic maneuvers in the Caucasus region underscore the fluidity of Russia's geopolitical allegiances. As Armenia navigates this shifting landscape, questions linger regarding Russia's true intentions (its interests in Syria and Libya with regard to Turkey), its hindered oil-gas trade outsourced to Azerbaijan, and the overarching implications for regional stability. Amid this uncertainty, a nuanced understanding of prevailing geopolitical dynamics is essential to chart a path toward lasting peace and security in the South Caucasus.

Conclusion

The conflicts in Karabakh and Armenia must be understood within the context of Russia's broader geopolitical strategy. By instigating proxy wars and exploiting regional tensions, Putin's Russia aims to maintain regional control and externalize the "enemy" by undermining democratic movements in neighboring countries. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for effectively navigating the complexities of the South Caucasus region and promoting stability and democracy in Armenia and beyond.

The Velvet Revolution in Armenia (akin to the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003) and the subsequent flare-up in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations underscore the complex interplay of domestic politics, regional dynamics, and external influences in the South Caucasus. As Armenia navigates these challenges, Russia and other international actors will continue to shape the region's geopolitical landscape with significant implications for security and sustainable stability. Pragmatic geopolitical realities and the collapse of historical narratives have reshaped Armenia's relationship with Russia, signaling a new chapter in their centuries-old alliance. Understanding the reasons behind this shift is necessary to properly assess Armenia's future foreign policy trajectory and regional dynamics.

Russia's Intended Naval Base in Ochamchire: Implications for Georgian and Black Sea Security

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Kornely Kakachia¹
Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University

Salome Minesashvili
Georgian Institute of Politics

Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine and occupation of its sovereign territories since 2014 are reshaping the geopolitical map of Europe and sending ripples of apprehension across the wider Black Sea region. For Georgia, a country that has historically navigated complex regional dynamics, the situation in Ukraine holds special significance. The country is also particularly vulnerable to Russia's aggressive posture. With the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive having forced Russia to withdraw much of its Black Sea fleet from the Crimean Peninsula and look for safer options, Russia plans to establish a permanent naval base at the Russian-occupied Abkhazian port of Ochamchire.

This plan poses an imminent threat to Georgian national security: not only would it cement Moscow's control of the 20 percent of Georgia's internationally recognized territories that Russia has long occupied, but it would also put Russian forces within striking distance of the Russian ports of Poti and Batumi—an especially pressing issue considering that Georgia has no navy of its own with which to counter such a threat. Politically, Moscow could use its military presence as a tool of coercion to deter Tbilisi from its Euro-Atlantic ambitions, while the fact that Kyiv would consider the base a legitimate military target in the ongoing war means that Georgia would likely be drawn directly into the conflict, shattering its current official neutrality. More broadly, the Russian base has the potential to destabilize the Black Sea region as a whole, including the burgeoning Middle Corridor trade route from China to Europe that bypasses Russia, of which Georgia is a major component.

¹ Kornely Kakachia is a Professor of Political Science at Ivane Javakishvili Tbilisi State University. Dr. Salome Minesashvili is an affiliated Policy Analyst at Georgian Institute of Politics.

Russia's Maritime Expansion in the Black Sea Region

In October 2023, Aslan Bzhania, de-facto leader of Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia, [announced](#) an agreement to establish a new Russian naval base at the port of Ochamchire, some 50 kilometers from the Abkhazian capital city of Sokhumi. The move, he said, "aimed at increasing the defense capability of both Russia and Abkhazia." Accordingly, the base will be not a temporary hub for forces actively [engaged](#) in conflict on the Black Sea, but a permanent installation.

Having been forced to withdraw from the occupied Crimean Peninsula due to the Ukrainian counteroffensive, the Russian fleet has retreated down to the Russian city of Novorossiysk. At least 17 vessels have been [relocated](#) there from the port of Sevastopol. The new base at Ochamchire would be 500 kilometers further southeast, putting the Russian fleet much further from Ukrainian shores and thus making it less vulnerable to attack. Ukraine's recent securement of F-16 fighter jets from its Western allies might have added further impetus to this decision: whenever they arrive, these aircraft may [pose](#) a serious threat to the fleet in its current location.

The port of Ochamchire is already being [used](#) as a base for Russian coast guard ships under a 2009 agreement between the Kremlin and Sokhumi authorities. Some development has been carried out since then, including repairing the railway platform and connecting the port with Sokhumi. In 2017, with the Russian government's lease on the port of Sevastopol expiring, Ochamchire was [mooted](#) as a new base for the Russian Black Sea Fleet, but these discussions faded when the Yanukovych government extended that lease until 2042.

At present, the port of Ochamchire – at only 9 meters deep – cannot receive large ships. Significant technical and infrastructural work would be [required](#) to address this. However, Russia can still moor smaller vessels at the port, [facilitating](#) supply and logistics operations. In addition, satellite images obtained by the BBC [show](#) that dredging and construction have been under way at the site since 2022. These works should allow the port to accept smaller vessels of the kind that have been actively used by Russia to [strike](#) targets in Ukraine and [reload](#) its Kalibr cruise missiles onto vessels.

Russia Cementing Occupation of Georgian Territories

Russia is already present militarily in Georgia's two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A naval presence in the port of Ochamchire would add another component to the Russian occupation, further strengthening Russian-backed separatism in Abkhazia and limiting the prospects of Georgia's international borders being restored. This development serves as a yet another

manifestation of Moscow's persistent imperialist efforts to [undermine](#), destabilize, and exert enduring influence over Georgia with a view to altering its sovereign choices.

Russia has used the Ochamchire port for naval operations in the past. During the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, Russian vessels were deployed to the port and [used](#) it as a launching pad for advances into the territory controlled by Tbilisi. Since then, the aforementioned 2009 agreement with the de-facto Abkhaz leadership has granted Russia indirect control of the port.

Georgia has been facing challenges to its naval security for years. The elimination of the Georgian Navy after the 2008 Russian invasion and its subsequent transformation into a coastal patrol force have left the country with limited maritime defense capabilities. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent reinforcement of its Black Sea military presence have only intensified the threat. But a permanent Russian naval presence within striking distance of the Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi would pose a more imminent national security challenge for Georgia.

Furthermore, Moscow might use this expanded military presence as a tool of political coercion vis-à-vis Tbilisi. Already, the Georgian government, despite its declared pursuit of NATO and EU membership, has been following an ambiguous path in its relations with Russia. Clearly anti-Russian politics has been ruled out, leading some to [dub](#) the approach "balancing" or "appeasement." Gaining this additional leverage might enable Russia to further shift the pendulum of Georgian politics away from Tbilisi's formally expressed Euro-Atlantic ambitions.

Spillover of the Russian-Ukrainian War into Georgia

If Russia does relocate its Black Sea Fleet to the port of Ochamchire, it has the potential to transform Georgia into a versatile strategic asset for Russia's endeavors against Ukraine—or even an additional theater of conflict. The acquisition of the Ochamchire base not only empowers Russia to launch assaults from Georgia's shores, but also [heightens](#) Georgia's susceptibility to retaliatory actions by Ukraine. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has already [announced](#) that any new Russian base, including in Abkhazia, would be considered a legitimate target of the Ukrainian military. This reality threatens to bring the war to Georgian territory, posing an acute security challenge.

The new base also has the potential to jeopardize Georgia's official neutrality. While the absolute majority of Georgians [support](#) a pro-Ukraine stance—96 percent of those polled stated that the war concerns Georgians as well and 87 percent think it is their war, too—and [perceive](#) Ukraine as a key political ally

(behind only the United States and the European Union), Georgian officials have been reluctant to take a clear-cut position. Indeed, Tbilisi has avoided both joining the international sanctions on Russia and resumed direct flights with the latter. In an attempt to maintain this neutrality, officials have [downplayed](#) the Russian plans as not posing an imminent threat to Tbilisi, since the required construction works at the port of Ochamchire are expected to take several years. Only the opposition parties have [decried](#) the Russian move as a threat to Georgian sovereignty and officially called on NATO and EU states to take a unified stance against Russia's plan. If the war widens up to Georgian territory, however, the government's naïve expectation that it can maintain its official neutrality will be shattered as well as it will damage Tbilisi's "pragmatic" foreign policy towards Russia.

Georgia's role as a Connectivity Hub for the Middle Corridor Threatened

Russia's increased naval presence in Black Sea could also threaten Georgia's status as a global East-West connectivity hub. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Georgia has found itself at the center of the main transit route that connects the East with the West while bypassing Russia. Moscow's isolation has made overland trade routes traversing Russia less attractive for international shippers. As a result, some of this cargo has been [redirected](#) to the "Middle Corridor," which connects China to Europe via Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Black Sea. The Mega project, currently supported by the EU, China and international finance institutions, aims to strengthen these sea and land freight links, enabling goods from China, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus to access lucrative markets in Europe and beyond.

Georgia's strategic location on the eastern edge of the Black Sea makes it the linchpin of the Middle Corridor. Georgia has enthusiastically embraced its newfound transit role and has openly tried to take advantage of it, including by [initiating](#) new infrastructure projects and a "strategic partnership" with China, which considers the Middle Corridor to be part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Between Georgia's strategic location and the fact that as of this writing it is the only country in the region with free trade agreements with both China and the EU, it is an attractive alternative to transit routes through Russia. Accordingly, in the first 5 months of 2023, the transit of goods from China to Europe along the Middle Corridor [increased](#) by 77 percent compared to the same period in 2022. Along similar lines, in 2023, a Poti-Constanta ferry service connecting Georgia and Romania was [launched](#) to replace the Poti-Chornomorsk ferry service between Georgia and Ukraine that had been interrupted by the war. This is the first ferry service to carry both passengers and cargo between the EU and Georgia.

The key component of the Middle Corridor is a deep-sea port project in Anaklia, Georgia, which is meant to boost commerce along the Corridor, the fastest route for [delivering](#) cargo between Asia and Europe. The idea for the port gained momentum after the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, when the West began [looking](#) for alternatives to overland transit via Russia. The corridor is expected to significantly reduce travel times and, according to World Bank optimistic calculations, may [triple](#) trade volumes by 2030.

The militarization of Ochamchire, located just 35 kilometers from Anaklia, would be highly damaging to the already delayed Anaklia port plans. Construction, which began in 2017, was cancelled in 2020 by the Georgian Dream government, which accused Western-funded consortia of having failed to meet their obligations. Critics, however, attributed the decision to the GD politics of appeasing Russia: Moscow [opposed](#) the project, which it saw as a U.S. effort to dock its submarines on the Black Sea. With the government's increasing interest in cooperation with China, the project was revived in 2022, and in September 2023 the Ministry of Economy [revealed](#) two finalists for the private-public partnership that would build the port: Chinese-Singaporean and Swiss-Luxembourgian consortia.

Russia's naval expansion in nearby waters would give it leverage over trade and transportation links in Black Sea that could jeopardize Georgia's ambition to cement its commercial position in the Black Sea. After all, a Russian military presence might deter potential investors in the Anaklia project and sink the port plans once again. That being said, the degree of risk might be determined by the bidding outcome. While Russia might be relatively tolerant of a Chinese presence in Georgia, Ochamchire would likely become a source of destabilization of a Western-backed project.

Destabilization of the Wider Black Sea Region

Russia's expansion in the Black Sea region not only undermines Georgia's territorial integrity, but also signals its ambitions toward other post-Soviet states and poses security threats to the countries of the Black Sea basin, including NATO members and the EU. Moscow is once again displaying a willingness to cement its hegemony in the region, including by military means. The new base may serve as a launching pad for regional aggression: forces on the Black Sea could easily be deployed throughout the Caucasus and the Black Sea basin, posing a threat to the entire region. Therefore, the move further conveys the Kremlin's commitment to projecting power over its periphery, especially those countries striving for NATO membership.

Since the Black Sea borders NATO members, Russia's determination to preserve its dominance on the Black Sea represents a challenge to Western security. Besides military threats, Russia can disrupt trade and commercial movements, whether through the Middle Corridor or otherwise, as [evidenced](#) already by its weaponization of food and grain exports destined for the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. If Russia relocates its fleet to Ochamchire, this enhanced Russian naval capability will threaten not only Georgia's security and its status as a global East-West connectivity hub, but also the security of the broader Black Sea region.

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine war has decreased Georgia's resilience and increased its military and security vulnerability to Russian threats. Russia's further pursuit of dominance in the Black Sea region by expanding its naval presence not only has troubling implications for Ukraine, but would provide Russia with leverage against Georgia and the rest of the countries in the Caucasus and Black Sea region, as well as affecting trade and transport routes between Asia and Europe. This reality reinforces the need for increased cooperation and coordination between the EU, NATO, the US, and the countries of the Black Sea region to address common security challenges. Such joint efforts will hinge significantly on how the new balance of power in the broader Black Sea region is reshaped as a result of the Ukraine war.

Part III.

Public Opinions and Local Perceptions

Local Responses to Russian Migration in Georgia and Kazakhstan

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Mariam Darchiashvili,¹ *Ilia State University*
Ketevan Gurchiani, *Ilia State University*
Nikita Mishakov, *Nazarbayev University*
Caress Schenk, *Nazarbayev University*

Since both countries border Russia and have visa-free entry for Russian citizens, Georgia and Kazakhstan have received many of the Russians fleeing the impact of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While a mass exodus of people from a country is nothing unique in human history (nor is the experience of uncertainty and precarity among migrants leaving Russia), what has been unprecedented is the flow of migrants from a former colonizer into those former colonies. While these migrants did not come as colonizers, their colonial identity was front and center in the minds of both host populations.

From the first influx of conscientious objectors and sanctions-dodgers in March 2022, the two countries came to experience Russia's actions in Ukraine not only as a moral and geopolitical event, but also as one that had immediate consequences and a visible presence in their own countries. Nevertheless, this situation has played out differently in Georgia and Kazakhstan due to differences in the two countries' language and ethnicity landscapes, their diplomatic relations, and the openness of their public spaces. Georgia's long-fraught relationship with Russia has allowed more space for direct criticism of the invasion, including public protests and street graffiti. Kazakhstan's much closer diplomatic ties have made for more muted criticism, though there have been public protests alongside the significant efforts to collect humanitarian aid for Ukraine. Two years on, whereas

¹ Mariam Darchiashvili is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Ilia State University (Georgia). Ketevan Gurchiani is Professor of Anthropology at Ilia State University. Nikita Mishakov is a PhD student in Eurasian Studies at Nazarbayev University (Kazakhstan). Caress Schenk is Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Nazarbayev University (Kazakhstan).

Russian migrants in Georgia lead largely parallel lives to Georgians, centering their daily activities around institutions seldom used by the host population, migrants in Kazakhstan have largely integrated into society, initiating the arduous process of confronting colonial identities.

Language and Ethnicity

A key point of difference between Georgia and Kazakhstan is that following the collapse of the Soviet Union, most ethnic Russians left Georgia, while many stayed in Kazakhstan. Coupled with this, Georgian was a key language in Soviet Georgia, whereas in Kazakhstan upward mobility depended on speaking Russian. With the influx of migrants from Russia starting in February 2022, language has become an especially important and contentious point of contact between locals and migrants.

Prior to the war, only 0.5% of Georgia's population was ethnically Russian. The Russian population in Georgia was so minuscule that it remained inconspicuous, and neither the public nor the media crafted any distinct image regarding Russian communities in Georgia. In Kazakhstan, meanwhile, ethnic Russians comprised around 15% of the total population, not counting the [substantial](#) share of residents of mixed [ethnicity](#). As a result, the presence of Russians and the use of the Russian language is normalized in Kazakhstan (though not apolitical). Thus, when migrants began pouring across the Russian border, language was politicized differently in the two countries.

In Georgia, language politics has played out in the arena of education and in everyday spaces. Even during the Soviet era, Georgians considered it a point of pride to maintain their titular language as the language of instruction at all levels of education, and the fight against Russification primarily took place in universities and schools. Prior to the war, Russian-language education was seen as a form of Russian soft power, and in November 2022, the Minister of Education [stressed](#) that no new Russian-language schools would be opened. However, it is widely known that an increasing number of private Russian-language schools [operate](#) without Georgian [accreditation](#). Even the issue of migrant children's right to state education [proved](#) controversial, with some questioning whether the "state should finance [the education of] migrants who are at the same time occupants/occupiers."

Another contentious arena is what language is spoken on the streets and especially in cafes. A report on Russian cafes in Tbilisi [found](#) it was routinely impossible to receive service or find menus in Georgian, citing this as a violation of the law that services must be available in the state language. This report catalyzed negative attitudes and active discussion within Georgian communities. In Georgian cafes,

meanwhile, Russians encounter trouble if they use Russian, as many people, especially in the younger generation, simply do not speak that language. Instead, Russians have come to converse predominantly in English, at least in public.

In Kazakhstan, though the use of Russian language is widespread, especially throughout the north of the country and in major cities such as Almaty and Astana, denizens understand the finely nuanced political debate surrounding the Russian language. The generation of Russians born since independence, in particular, sees Kazakhstan as their home, integrates Kazakh traditions and holidays into their practices, and is not oriented toward Russia as a homeland.

When Russian citizens began arriving following the mobilization, ethnic Russian citizens of Kazakhstan had similar reactions to other groups. These included concerns about the impact of Russians on the economy and society, and potential chauvinism. This response on the part of Kazakhstan's Russians highlighted that ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan are quite different than their counterparts from Russia. In other words, ethnicity is not always the most salient factor of identity; many other factors (attachment to the country as a whole or to a particular region/locale) may be far more important.

Perceptions of the importance of Kazakh language, always in a careful dance with retaining the official status of Russian, increased among all groups following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Kazakh language clubs became increasingly popular, among them [Batyl bol](#), created by [Aleksey Skalozubov](#), an ethnic Russian who [identifies](#) himself as Kazakh. Because the summer of 2022 was a time of intense reckoning with Russia's ongoing hegemony and imperialistic overtures, citizens of Kazakhstan, regardless of ethnicity, were sensitive to any perceived arrogance on the part of migrants coming from Russia. Even the proclamations of Russians that they had come to Kazakhstan because they could speak Russian and easily integrate were met with bristling on the part of locals, who were more finely attuned to the real and symbolic importance of the Kazakh language in society.

Indeed, even though Russian is widespread in Kazakhstan, the country's Russian-language media space has developed independently of Russia. While it is of course possible for most citizens of Kazakhstan to access internet resources from Russia and even Russian state television channels, Kazakhstan has its own Russian-language television, news, and social media space. On a practical level, while citizens and foreigners alike can manage life in either Kazakh or Russian (as both have official status in the country) and foreigners can integrate even if they speak only Russian, the linguistic landscape remains political. Yet the politicization of language occurs in spaces where only a minority of the population is truly bilingual to the extent that the Russian language could be eradicated easily or quickly.

War and Fear of War

Both Georgia and Kazakhstan recognize their precarious place on Russia's border, given Russia's historical practice of protecting its citizens and co-ethnics abroad. For Georgia, however, this fear comes with concrete experience of conflict with Russia in the recent past, whereas for Kazakhstan it remains more abstract.

Discussions of Russian migration to Georgia often begin with the reminder that 20 percent of Georgian territory is already occupied by Russia – a reference to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which were the targets of the 2008 war. In light of this direct experience with war and occupation, the presence of Russians in Georgia takes on an existential tone. Passportization practices in the occupied territory, where Russia has extended passports to Georgian citizens who then become the target of Russia's efforts to protect citizens abroad, are fresh in the minds of Georgian citizens as they encounter Russian migrants.

During the wave of immigration that accompanied Russia's September 2022 "partial mobilization," Georgian media frequently reported on human trafficking along the border between Russia and Georgia. This prompted a fearful response from Georgian society, which was concerned about the possibility of another wave of occupation. The media often expressed concern that the growing Russian minority in Georgia might provide a pretext for Putin to invade the country by claiming the need to protect ethnic Russians or Russian citizens. Surveys conducted among the Georgian population indicate a widespread belief that there is an ever-present threat of renewed conflict that might escalate into war.

Concerns about Russian occupation have become intertwined with questions of economic marginalization. As new Russian communities have sprung up, it has prompted extensive discussion in Georgian society. The general sentiment is that Russians are [displacing](#) the Georgian middle class. Many people feel that Georgians are leaving the country due to economic difficulties and Russians are taking their place. Gentrification, soaring property prices, and displacement occasioned by Russian immigration have only exacerbated the situation. Georgian enterprises are being replaced by Russian businesses, and with prices rising, Georgians are finding it increasingly challenging to rent the business spaces and houses they used to.

In Kazakhstan, while both the economic and existential lenses are present, they are perhaps more subtle because Kazakhstan has maintained a close relationship to Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union and has not experienced overt conflict or war with Russia.

Many geopolitically oriented commentators see Kazakhstan's diplomatic relations with Russia through the lenses of Great Games and Russian hegemony. The view from Kazakhstan is more nuanced. When the Eurasian Economic Union was formalized in 2015, in Kazakhstan it was framed primarily as an arrangement initiated by Kazakhstan's then-president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. Indeed, Kazakhstan has always asserted its agency vis-à-vis Russia. However, decolonial discourses increasingly complicate this vision of Kazakhstan's agency, focusing instead on vulnerabilities and hegemonies imposed by Russia. The reality is that vulnerability and agency coexist in Russia and Kazakhstan's relationship.

The war in Ukraine shows how Kazakhstan uses this positionality creatively and actively to demonstrate its opposition to the war without alienating itself from Moscow by [taking](#) a specific stance on the war. The domestic audience is also a crucially important factor in these interactions, driving the postcolonial discourse and national revival sentiment (especially with regard to Kazakh language, but also when it comes to traditional dress and cultural traditions such as holiday celebrations) in academic and social media spaces.

Numerous geopolitical events have been actively discussed by the public in Kazakhstan. These range from the activities of political leaders (for example, Vladimir Putin's October 2022 [visit](#) to Astana and Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's May 2023 visit to Moscow) to statements by cultural leaders, as when, in November 2022, talking heads on Russia's First Channel program "Evening with Vladimir Solovyov" warned that the same "Nazi processes" that had forced Russia to intervene in Ukraine could easily start in Kazakhstan. Russian cultural leaders or lower-level political officials occasionally [make](#) such statements, stoking fears that the Russian population in Kazakhstan is not safe.

While high-level discussion of the potential for conflict is avoided at all costs, and diplomatic relations continue to be extremely careful, in certain arenas anxiety over Russia's potential encroachment is evident. One of these arenas is Kazakhstan's citizenship policy. While Kazakhstan has always rejected the possibility of dual citizenship, this has become especially acute in the past decade: Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, people found with two passports have been actively [prosecuted](#) and in many cases stripped of their Kazakhstani citizenship.

Unlike the issue of language, fears of war remain quite independent of interactions between migrants and locals. Those who fear Russian intervention cannot point to anything more concrete than the types of media statements made above and the experience of countries like Ukraine and Georgia. Public spaces and activism, discussed in the following section, show a mix of these attributes, sometimes bringing migrants and locals into interaction and at other times taking on a life of their own regardless of concrete interactions.

Public Spaces and Political Activism

Given Georgia's and Kazakhstan's dramatically different diplomatic relations with Russia, it is no surprise that anti-Russian or pro-Ukrainian expressions in public spaces have developed differently in the two countries. In Georgia, the migration wave was met with a proliferation of graffiti, with the prevailing messages often conveying sentiments like "Russians go home" or "No Russian is welcome, whether good or bad." In Kazakhstan, while there has been some demonstrable support for Ukraine, anti-Russian sentiment on the streets is carefully controlled and closely monitored by the government.

These differences also manifest in the sphere of activism. In Spring 2022, massive public demonstrations in Georgia offered support to the Ukrainian cause. Protests also centered on criticism of Tbilisi for not [joining](#) international sanctions on Russia, which was seen as an attempt to appease Moscow. Unlike their government, the Georgian people demonstrated significant solidarity with Ukraine and its people through a series of rallies on Rustaveli Avenue, as well as engaging in various charity activities. Anti-war activism is also common among Russian emigres to Georgia, even if the activism of Russian and Georgians takes place in distinctly separate spheres.

Public controversy again flared in Georgia when flights to Russia resumed in May 2023 after a four-year ban. The resumption coincided with the European Union, the United States, Canada, and other states banning Russian airlines from entering their airspace. Pro-Western President Salome Zurbishvili protested the restoration of relations with Russia on Twitter and demonstrators greeted the first arriving flights with anti-Putin slogans. When Yekaterina Vinokurova (the daughter of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov) [attended](#) a wedding in Georgia, it caused an uproar among the Georgian population, leading to the [disruption](#) of the wedding, which was being held at one of the country's most prominent resorts.

In Kazakhstan, though public rallies are generally closely controlled by the government, several [pro-Ukraine](#)/anti-war rallies have been allowed, even when not officially [sanctioned](#). However, some activists and protestors have been [jailed](#) for their anti-war and [anti-Russia](#) activities, including [protesting](#) the influx of Russian emigres. While these arrests tend to garner international attention, these restrictions do not deter activists from their activities. Still, most activism happens in quieter spaces or is directed toward activities such as humanitarian [aid](#) or [boycotting](#) the concerts of pro-war Russian artists.

While activists among the Russian emigre community are probably less likely to go to Kazakhstan than to Georgia, members of the LGBTQ+ community, among others, have integrated into local activist communities to a much greater extent than in Georgia. Because of the marginalized position of activists in Kazakhstan, many communities are multi-profile, for example taking up issues of sexual identity and decolonization. As they navigate these multiple issues, remaining inclusive has been a key value that has benefitted those Russian emigres hoping to integrate.

Conclusion

While Georgia and Kazakhstan share a common lens on Russia, seeing it as a hegemonic actor and colonizer, these attitudes have played out differently at the popular level due to differences in language and ethnicity, experience of open conflict with Russia, and the openness of public spaces to activism.

In response to the unfavorable attitudes of Georgians toward Russian migration, Russians adopt a “secret lifestyle” in the country. Despite their visibly increased presence on the streets, their daily activities occur in areas seldom visited by Georgians: an entire ecosystem of schools, kindergartens, educational centers, clinics, psychological assistance centers, mutual aid centers, entertainment centers, and beauty establishments exist in parallel to Georgian society. As a result, the Georgian population has limited awareness of – or interest in – the lives of Russian migrants. Researchers such as [Giorgi Lomsadze](#) and [Florian Mühlfried](#) were among the first to observe that despite significant migration, Georgians and Russians have limited interaction, leading largely parallel lives despite the tense context and their physical proximity.

In Kazakhstan, meanwhile, the population has become habituated to the presence of migrants. While there is some evidence from ongoing research that certain pockets of migrants live in isolation, there are also many migrants who have melded into society. This process has been eased by the widespread use of the Russian language in Kazakhstan, as well as by the historical presence of ethnic Russians. Thanks to the greater integration of migrants and locals, the long and arduous process of confronting colonial identities has begun and represents a glimmer of hope in the shadow of war.

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How Uzbek State and Society View Foreign Relations in the Context of the Russo-Ukrainian War

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Eric McGlinchey¹

George Mason University

Russia's war in Ukraine is reshaping how Uzbeks view Moscow. Tashkent's political elites have repeatedly reminded Moscow of the value that Uzbekistan places on state sovereignty and have resoundingly repudiated actors questioning Uzbek state sovereignty. At the same time, these political elites have taken care to avoid alienating Moscow, especially at a time when Uzbekistan stands to benefit from Moscow's pivot toward Central Asia as the West turns away from Russia.

Survey and focus group data reflect similarly mixed sentiments within Uzbek society at large. Russia's reputation has eroded since the start of the war. Perhaps most problematic for Moscow is the fact that Uzbeks under the age of 30 have far less favorable views toward Russia than older generations. That said, a slim majority of these younger Uzbeks (and far wider majorities of older Uzbeks) still view Russia in a favorable light. The same cannot be said for the United States and China, which many Uzbeks—especially older Uzbeks—view with suspicion.

This memo explores these mixed views among Uzbek state and society toward Russia, the United States, and China. Section one summarizes relevant statements made by Uzbek elite since the start of the war in Ukraine. Section two covers Uzbek public opinion, presenting findings from a nationally representative survey that my colleagues and I conducted in the fall of 2022, seven months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February. The final section presents the findings of focus groups that my colleagues and I conducted in Tashkent and Samarkand in the summer of 2023. Taken together, this memo suggests that Uzbeks, while still

¹ Eric McGlinchey is Associate Professor in the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University

keeping Beijing and Washington at arm's length, are beginning to question their country's relationship with Moscow. How far Uzbek state and society will take this questioning will ultimately depend on economic factors—on whether Uzbekistan's now-strained trade relations with Russia can withstand the further erosion that will likely accompany a prolonged war in Ukraine.

The Response of Uzbek Political Elites to Russia's War in Ukraine

The Uzbek government, like those of other Central Asian states, is prioritizing its national interests while navigating how to best respond to Russia's war in Ukraine. These interests are multifaceted and rarely easy to pursue. The Mirziyoyev government wants to make it clear to Russia that Uzbekistan's sovereignty is non-negotiable. At the same time, regional economic, political, and security imperatives compel President Mirziyoyev to tread carefully in his country's bilateral relations with the Putin regime.

Uzbekistan, wary of Russia's actions in Ukraine, is actively diversifying its international partnerships. Newly engaged—or, as is the case with the United States, newly re-engaged—Western partners demand that Uzbekistan not provide material support to Russia's war of aggression. Importantly, however, determining how best to respond domestically to Putin's war is an equally challenging prospect. A notable segment of Uzbek society is displeased with Moscow. At the same time, Russia remains a critical trade partner, source of labor remittances, supplier of natural gas, and, in contrast to other foreign countries, a government that both Uzbek state and society understand and are comfortable with.

Given this wide array of sometimes opposing foreign relations imperatives, it may come as a surprise that the Mirziyoyev government, in its response to the war in Ukraine, has avoided alienating any key international actors while making reputational and material gains with other bilateral and multilateral partners. Nowhere is this adept balance more apparent than Tashkent's most important and sometimes challenging international partnership: its bilateral relationship with Moscow.

Uzbekistan, in contrast to Kazakhstan, which shares a 7,600-kilometer border with Russia, is not a centerpiece of Russian irredentist imaginations. Whereas President Putin and former President Medvedev have both asserted that Kazakhstan is not a real state and suggested that Russia has valid claims to Kazakh territory, only B-list Russian nationalists have advanced similar claims with regard to Uzbekistan. The xenophobe Zakhar Prilepin is an exception that proves the rule here. Known both for his ultra-nationalist writings and for fighting alongside pro-Russia Donetsk separatists, Prilepin [made](#) the following declaration in December 2023:

“since 2 million of your citizens are on our territory, we claim your territory... Who forbids us to do anything in Eurasia after the parade in Kyiv? No one.”

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs quickly distanced Moscow from Prilepin’s comments. In the months since, Moscow has gone to considerable lengths to shore up relations with Tashkent. In April 2024, Moscow’s trade representative in Tashkent, Igor Kamynin, [pledged](#) that Russia would maintain parity with China when it comes to trade turnover with Uzbekistan—and this lofty pledge has been backed by real action. In 2023, Russia’s Gazprom and Uzbekistan’s UzGasTrade agreed to increase shipments of Russian national gas supplies to Uzbekistan from three billion cubic meters to 11 billion cubic meters by 2026. In April 2024, Russia’s Lukoil and the Uzbek Ministry of Poverty Alleviation agreed to a [program](#) aimed at facilitating Uzbek employment with the Russian energy giant.

Uzbek President Mirziyoyev has been careful to avoid antagonizing his Russian counterpart. The Uzbek president was in attendance at Red Square for Putin’s Victory Parade on May 9, 2023. Mirziyoyev has also instructed his country’s ambassador to the United Nations to refrain from voting on or voting against UN General Assembly resolutions censuring Russia for its war in Ukraine. At the same time, the Mirziyoyev government, like all Central Asian governments, must engage a domestic audience that has growing misgivings about Russia, its colonial legacy, and its general disregard for international norms of state sovereignty.

At times it appears as though Uzbekistan’s leaders share these misgivings. President Mirziyoyev, issuing a statement through his spokesman not long after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, [stressed](#) that Uzbekistan maintains “close, friendly relations with both Russia and Ukraine” and is “interested in ensuring peace, stability, and sustainable development in our vast region.” Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Komilov was more direct the following month, [emphasizing](#) that Uzbekistan “recognizes Ukraine’s independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. We do not recognize the Luhansk and Donetsk republics.”

Survey Findings on the General Public’s Perceptions of Uzbek Foreign Relations

Komilov’s defense of Ukraine’s sovereignty was prescient. The Uzbek foreign minister’s statement not only put ultra-nationalists like Prilepin on warning but also foreshadowed a weakening of Uzbek society’s affinity for Russia. Gallup’s World Poll, conducted annually in Uzbekistan, provides a window into these changing domestic attitudes. In August 2021, 69 percent of the 1,000 Uzbeks that Gallup polled indicated that they “approved of the job performance of the leadership of Russia.” By July 2022, that same figure had dipped to 63 percent, and Gallup’s most recent survey in July 2023 found that it had declined even further

to 59 percent.

While this 10 percent drop in Putin's approval since the start of Russia's war in Ukraine is notable, it is important that we contextualize Uzbek perceptions of world leaders more broadly. Over this same period, Uzbek approval of U.S. leadership dropped from 33 percent to 30 percent, while that of Chinese leadership rose from 33 percent to 39 percent. In short, while the Gallup surveys indicate that the Putin regime has suffered a reputational decline among the Uzbek public in the two years since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government nevertheless enjoys far greater goodwill among Uzbeks surveyed than either Beijing or Washington.

Surveys and focus groups that colleagues and I conducted in the months following Russia's invasion of Ukraine provide insight into why—despite Uzbek concerns that Moscow's imperial ambitions may extend beyond Ukraine as well as widespread displeasure with Russian nationalists like Prilepin—the majority of Uzbeks continue to view Russia in a positive light. Part of the explanation lies in Uzbekistan's extensive economic, cultural, and linguistic ties to Russia. Beyond the fact that millions of Uzbeks work in Russia, sending economically critical remittances back home, Uzbeks are active on Russian social media platforms, closely follow Russian news sources, watch Russian television and movies, and attend Russian universities.

Importantly, however, these extensive ties with Russia are not the only reason why Uzbeks viewed the Putin regime in a relatively favorable light. Our surveys and focus groups reveal that Uzbeks have yet to fully embrace China and that, as they have for much of the post-Soviet period, they continue to harbor a deep distrust of the United States. In our nationally representative September–October 2022 survey of 1,000 Uzbek respondents, we presented the following hypothetical scenario:

In the future, if hard times come to Uzbekistan—for example, a food shortage, widespread unemployment, hyperinflation, or a pandemic—which country will come to Uzbekistan's aid?

Despite the ongoing war in Ukraine, 46 percent of respondents indicated that they thought Russia would come to Uzbekistan's aid. Far fewer—only 20 percent of respondents—anticipated China extending support. Even fewer still—7 percent of respondents—felt that the United States would help Uzbekistan if it were in crisis.

One potential reason for Russia faring well in this hypothetical is Moscow's historical, geographic, and economic proximity to Tashkent. Uzbek respondents may view Russia as more likely to intervene and support Uzbekistan during a

period of crisis for the same reasons that Moscow intervened to help quell the January 2022 protests in Kazakhstan: such interventions in Central Asia are in Moscow’s geopolitical interest, whereas interventions are less likely to fall under the geopolitical interests of Beijing and Washington.

Revealingly, however, respondents’ answers regarding which countries they view in a positive light suggest that, geopolitics aside, Uzbeks are far more positively inclined toward Moscow than either Beijing or Washington. A notable 76 percent of Uzbeks surveyed reported holding a positive view of Russia, while just 52 percent and 45 percent said the same for China and the United States respectively.

This comparatively warm sentiment toward Moscow similarly emerges in respondents’ answers to the following question: “In your opinion, which country at the current moment is Uzbekistan’s main friend?” More than half of those surveyed—54 percent—said Russia. Curiously, despite 52 percent of Uzbeks reporting a positive view of Beijing, only 5 percent of respondents identified China as Uzbekistan’s main friend. Washington fared even worse, with only 1 percent of respondents identifying the United States as Uzbekistan’s main friend.

In an effort to move away from what could be viewed as abstract questions focused on government actors and move toward an issue that affects Uzbeks’ everyday lives, we asked respondents if they would welcome students from various countries as neighbors. More than two-thirds of respondents—68 percent—said they *would not* welcome students from China as neighbors. Survey respondents were similarly disinclined to having US students as neighbors, with 63 percent reporting that they would prefer not living next to Americans. Russian students were viewed as the least objectionable, with only 44 percent of respondents indicating that they would prefer not to have Russian students as neighbors.

Country	Country Favorability, Percent of All Uzbek Respondents	Country Favorability, Percent of 18-29-Year-Old Uzbek Respondents
Russia	76	56
China	52	61
United States	45	60

Uzbek society, of course, is far from uniform. Older generations have greater familiarity with Russia than do younger Uzbeks, who have no lived experience of the Soviet Union and who, as a cohort, have spent less time in migrant labor jobs in Russia. Importantly, our survey suggests that attitudes toward Russia, the

United States, and China all vary by age group.

These swings in public opinion—a 20 percent dip in Russian favorability and a 9 percent and 15 percent uptick in Chinese and U.S. favorability, respectively—among younger Uzbeks are remarkable and suggest that Moscow should not assume that Uzbek society will continue to be forgiving of Russian neocolonialism in the post-Soviet space. Indeed, as our focus groups reveal, Uzbeks are frustrated with the adverse effects the war in Ukraine is having on the Uzbek economy.

Focus Group Findings on the General Public’s Perceptions of Uzbek Foreign Relations

In an effort to better understand Uzbeks’ views on their country’s key foreign partners in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, we conducted focus groups in Tashkent and Samarkand in July 2023. As with our fall 2022 survey, we avoided direct questions about the war in Ukraine in deference to the political environment in which we were conducting our research. Focus group participants nevertheless routinely volunteered their thoughts on the conflict in Ukraine and, more broadly, on Uzbekistan’s relations with Russia, China, and the United States.

A central theme that emerged in our focus group conversations is the familiarity with which Uzbeks view Russia and the concern that Uzbeks have over how the war in Ukraine may adversely affect the Uzbek economy. Emblematic of this sentiment is the observation of a 26-year-old Uzbek woman in Tashkent:

Since Uzbekistan and Russia were in a union for many years, developments in Russia are of interest to us. Many of us work in Russia, and we are interested in how the war might affect us.

Another Tashkent respondent, an Uzbek male between the ages of 18 and 35 (exact age not given), believed that Russia was “on the side of peace.” The respondent was most concerned about how the war would affect trade with Russia. One male 36-year-old Uzbek participant in Samarkand shared similar economic worries:

The war between Russia and Ukraine affects not only these two countries but us as well. The war is leading to inflation, leading to rising food prices.

Focus group respondents, in short, were closely watching the war. While they worried that the war was adversely affecting Uzbekistan’s economy, focus group respondents did not blame Russia for the war or for the economic challenges that Uzbekistan was enduring.

Focus group respondents were less forgiving toward the United States and

President Biden. One Tashkent respondent—an ethnically Russian woman between the ages of 18 and 35—likened the U.S. president to a “lizard” and recounted news that she had heard about how President Biden “fell down the stairs.” A male 48-year-old ethnic Uzbek, also from Tashkent, similarly recounted the story about Biden’s fall down the stairs and added that the U.S. president was “giving money to Ukraine” —that it was thanks to Biden that Uzbekistan “has increasing poverty and inflation.”

While care should be taken when extrapolating from focus groups to the population at large, it is worth noting that Uzbek focus group respondents’ assessment that the US is more at fault for the war in Ukraine than is Russia parallels a pattern we identified in surveys where we were able to pose direct questions about the conflict. In our nationally representative fall 2022 surveys in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, 76 percent of Kyrgyz respondents and 59 percent of Kazakh respondents agreed with the statement that “the US provoked the conflict in Ukraine,” while only 41 percent of Kyrgyz and 39 percent of Kazakh respondents agreed that “Russia provoked the conflict in Ukraine.”

China, curiously, was largely absent from the focus group discussions on Ukraine. While participants occasionally mentioned Chinese products and investments, Beijing did not figure prominently into focus group discussions about Uzbek foreign relations.

Conclusion

The picture that emerges from this memo’s analysis of focus groups, surveys, and Uzbek political elites’ statements is a complex one. Russia continues to be viewed in a generally positive light despite its ongoing war in Ukraine. A majority of survey respondents — albeit a slim majority at 54 percent in our fall 2022 survey — identify Russia as Uzbekistan’s “main friend” when it comes to foreign relations, resoundingly topping the 5 percent and 1 percent who identified China and the United States, respectively, as such.

Critically, however, Moscow’s reception among Uzbek state and society has suffered in recent years. Tashkent political elites have warned Moscow both directly and indirectly not to question Uzbek state sovereignty. One finding that emerged from our polling that should be most troubling for Moscow is that Uzbeks under the age of 30 hold more favorable views of China and the United States than they do of Russia. Moreover, our focus groups suggest that the affinity that does exist for Russia stems largely from Uzbeks’ recognition of the deep economic ties linking the two countries. Still, these same focus groups reveal deep concerns over these ties being strained by Russia’s war in Ukraine. Whether or not these ties continue to hold despite this increased strain will shape how Uzbeks —

especially young Uzbeks – view Russia in the coming years.

Role of Language and Age in Ethnic Qazaqs' Perceptions of the War in Ukraine

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Azamat Junisbai¹

Pitzer College

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine set in motion unprecedented processes in societies with a history of Russian rule. In Qazaqstan, the brazenly imperial character of Russia's aggression [fueled](#) the rise of previously marginalized decolonial perspectives critical of the USSR and modern-day Russia. Gaining a nuanced understanding of such developments is crucial, as they have the potential to profoundly reshape Russian power and influence in societies Russia once controlled. Previous analysis of public opinion data [shows](#) that ethnic Qazaqs are far more supportive of Ukraine and critical of Russia's aggression than their ethnic Russian compatriots. However, it is important to delve deeper into the factors associated with perspectives on the war *among* ethnic Qazaqs, especially given Qazaqstan's dramatic demographic transformation since independence.

One of the most consequential divides among ethnic Qazaqs has to do with language. As previous research has convincingly shown, it is important to [disaggregate](#) ethnicity and language because language can influence political preferences independently of ethnicity. Looking at four groups of ethnic Qazaqs—Qazaq-speakers aged 18–29, Russian-speakers aged 18–29, Qazaq-speakers aged 50 and above, and Russian-speakers aged 50 and above—we find that the vast majority of the first three groups are staunch supporters of Ukraine. They condemn the war and see Ukraine as a victim of Russian aggression. Older Russian-speakers, meanwhile, stand out as the group least sympathetic toward Ukraine, with only half of the group expressing support for Ukraine and several members of the group echoing Russian propaganda narratives about the alleged

¹ Azamat K. Junisbai is a Professor of Sociology at Pitzer College. His research interests include social stratification and public opinion about inequality and decolonization in Central Asia.

need for Russian intervention in Ukraine. This pattern can be explained by media consumption, specifically TV news: Whereas young people tend not to consume TV news and older Qazaq-speakers are insulated from Russian propaganda narratives because Qazaq-language TV news originates within Qazaqstan, older Russian-speakers reported also watching TV news programming on Russian channels.

Ethnic Qazaqs: A Growing and Diverse Demographic Group

According to the latest statistical data, ethnic Qazaqs now [comprise](#) over 70 percent of the country's population—a staggering increase from the late Soviet period, when Qazaqs made up less than 40 percent of the total. Meanwhile, the share of ethnic Russians has dwindled from near parity with Qazaqs in the 1989 census to just over 15 percent in 2023.

Importantly, ethnic Qazaqs are far from homogenous. One of the most consequential divides among them has to do with language. Since independence, Qazaq language, once relegated to rural areas and certain regions of the country (e.g., West Qazaqstan), has made a comeback. Following the abolition of the Soviet-era residential restrictions, massive numbers of Qazaq-speakers migrated from rural to urban areas in search of educational and economic opportunities. The city of Almaty, currently at 2.2 million [residents](#), is by far the largest destination of such migration. As a result, Qazaq language, once largely absent from the former capital, can now be heard in public spaces throughout the city. Nonetheless, there remains a sizable community of Russified urban Qazaqs for whom Russian serves as the first language. Among members of this group, knowledge of Qazaq can range from fluent to non-existent. The division between Qazaq- and Russian-speakers among ethnic Qazaqs is often fraught because thoroughly Russified Qazaqs usually come from more privileged urban backgrounds.

Another important demographic factor to be taken into account is age cohort membership. The population of Qazaqstan is young, with about [half](#) of the country's inhabitants under the age of 30. Members of this group were born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and grew up in independent Qazaqstan. Naturally, their socialization differed markedly from those who came of age during the Soviet era. How, if at all, this has translated into distinct attitudes toward Russia and Ukraine is something we need to learn more about.

Methodology

This policy memo uses data from 40 in-depth, face-to-face interviews conducted in Almaty in the summer of 2023 to shed light on the role of age and language in

perceptions of war among ethnic Qazaqs. To capture generational differences, we focused on two distinct cohorts: those aged 18-29 (n=20) and those aged 50 and above (n=20). Members of the latter group reached adulthood during the Soviet period, while those in the former were born after the collapse of the USSR. Within each of these age groups, we further divided respondents based on the primary language spoken. Half of them predominantly used Qazaq in their daily lives, while the other half predominantly used Russian. This analytical approach yielded four distinct groups of ethnic Qazaq respondents: Qazaq-speakers aged 18-29 (n=10), Russian-speakers aged 18-29 (n=10); Qazaq-speakers aged 50 and above (n=10), and Russian-speakers aged 50 and above (n=10).

A convenience sampling technique was used to select respondents. While non-random sampling has its limitations, including the potential for selection bias and the inability to make population-level inferences, convenience sampling is valuable for [generating](#) thick descriptions that can yield rich insights into social phenomena like attitudes toward the war among ethnic Qazaqs. Needless to say, obtaining state-of-the-art nationally representative survey data is also very important. A comprehensive understanding of decolonization developments triggered by the Russian aggression in Ukraine will require a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Attitudes toward the War among Ethnic Qazaqs Aged 18–29

Qazaq-Speakers

In discussions about the war, most of the young Qazaq-speakers were heavily pro-Ukrainian. They described Ukraine as a victim of unprovoked aggression by a larger enemy and highlighted the need for international assistance.

“Ukraine didn’t attack anyone and is fighting to preserve its territorial integrity” (Female, 29).

“After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine took the first steps to liberate itself from Russian influence. I support Ukraine” (Female, 26).

“They are defending their country, their land, they did not attack...Therefore, Ukraine is right. I support Ukraine. Because they are for a just cause, they are doing the right thing” (Male, 29).

“I support Ukraine. Different countries should help them. Because Russia, in order to expand its territory, started a war. Ukraine is not to blame for anything” (Female, 18).

“If a person is attacked, he defends himself. Ukraine is defending itself in the same way. I support Ukraine” (Male, 24).

Ukraine’s defensive position in the conflict was emphasized repeatedly by members of this group. Ukrainians’ dedication to safeguarding their homeland was also a theme that came up several times. A third theme raised by young Qazaq-speakers was solidarity with Ukraine’s effort to distance itself from Russian influence following the dissolution of the USSR.

Two people said that they were against the war but did not support either side. Importantly, none of the respondents in this group expressed support for Russian aggression.

Russian-Speakers

Interestingly, with just one exception, responses from young Russian-speaking Qazaqs were uniformly pro-Ukraine. The recurring themes among members of this group were disapproval of the war and a perception of Ukraine as a victim of Russian aggression.

“Ukraine is not at fault in this situation...” (Female, 20)

“This war is like a nightmare unfolding... No nation has the right to attack someone else’s territory” (Female, 25).

“I was shocked, I didn’t believe this could happen... When I used to watch news about wars in far-away countries, it always seemed so distant, but this one seems very close... Couldn’t help projecting that this could happen to us and everything in one’s life would crumble in an instant... I hope that the Ukrainians are able to restore their 1991 borders...” (Male, 29).

“Of course, I support Ukraine. There is no argument here” (Female, 27).

“Wars bring death and suffering, this is why I am strongly opposed to all wars. I support regular people. In this situation, Ukraine is a victim and this is why I support the Ukrainian people” (Male, 22).

“Ukraine is a victim. I hope that they will be able to fight back successfully” (Male, 27).

One person articulated a neutral position, maintaining that the war had little bearing on his own life:

“I don’t care who is fighting... Qazaqstan has enough of its own problems.... I have enough of my own problems” (Male, 27).

Much like their Qazaq-speaking peers, none of the young Russian-speaking Qazaqs expressed support for Russia’s actions.

Attitudes toward the War among Ethnic Qazaqs Aged 50+

Qazaq-Speakers

Most of the older Qazaq-speaking respondents were unequivocal in their support for Ukraine. Condemnation of the war and a view of Ukraine as a victim of Russian aggression were recurring themes.

“I support Ukraine because it was attacked. I feel sorry for Ukrainians” (Female, 62).

“[Russia] is destroying peaceful people... I support Ukrainians, they lived peacefully and were attacked by Russia” (Female, 55).

“War is bad, God forbid. Of course I support Ukraine” (Female, 71).

“In Ukraine, children and young people are being killed... Ukraine is protecting its land” (Male, 58).

“Ukrainians are good people, I feel sorry for them, they didn’t attack anyone... This is real fascism.. We fought against Hitler in 1941, fought for our Motherland; Ukrainians are doing the same today – fighting to liberate their land and free their country from aggressors. We support them” (Male, 68).

“We support Ukraine. The people of Ukraine proved resilient and the government of Ukraine proved capable of carrying out policy independent of Russia. Ukraine is trying to become a part of Europe and Russia doesn’t like it... We are unable to support Ukraine by sending soldiers and weapons, but Qazaqs morally support Ukrainians” (Male, 62).

“We are afraid that the same can happen to Qazaqstan” (Female, 66).

Overall, among people in this group, sympathy for Ukraine was nearly universal, as was condemnation of the Russian invasion. Interestingly, having come of age during the Soviet period has not made people in this group more receptive to Russia’s revanchist narratives.

Russian-Speakers

The opinions of older Russian-speaking Qazaqs about the war vary widely. Whereas clear majorities of the other three groups held pro-Ukrainian views, only half of this group expressed support for Ukraine. Among those who supported Ukraine, the sentiments were very similar to those expressed by Ukraine-supporters in the other groups.

“This is a war of aggression and conquest. Of course I support Ukraine” (Female, 64).

“Ukraine is defending its sovereignty. I am for Ukraine. Russia is an aggressor” (Male 54).

“I am very critical of Putin’s government. They are always attacking nations that try to escape [Russia’s] control” (Female, 64).

“Ukraine is fighting for her land and Russia is an aggressor” (Male, 67)

Three people blamed Ukraine for the war, echoing narratives put forth by Russian media.

“It all started with discrimination against ethnic Russians in Ukraine... Putin tolerated this as long as he could” (Female, 63).

“Ukrainians themselves are to blame for the war... They were killing their own citizens in Donetsk and Luhansk for several years. Russia tried to stop this for eight years, but when all efforts failed, it was forced to begin the war” (Male, 75).

“I don’t like the government of Ukraine, I can see what Zelensky is like” (Female, 51).

Several respondents in this group deliberately refrained from expressing support for Ukraine. They described war as something bad but insisted that they did not take sides in this conflict.

“I feel bad for the children, the elderly, homes being destroyed, civilian population suffering. I don’t support either side. Just feel bad for them” (Female, 63).

“War is terrible both morally and economically. Russia hurt itself because it is experiencing difficulty due to sanctions. It is bad for Europe as well because their prices went up... I try to stay away from politics, I don’t support either side” (Male, 70).

As these responses demonstrate, older Russian-speaking Qazaqs are more divided in their views of the war. While expressions of neutrality could also be found among members of the other three groups, explicitly anti-Ukrainian positions were limited to members of this particular group.

Discussion

Language and age combine to create a distinct pattern of attitudes toward the war. Those who consume news and information in Qazaq rather than Russian tend to be more critical of the war and supportive of Ukraine. Importantly, this pattern is evident even among older Qazaq-speakers who came of age during the Soviet era. In contrast, older Russian-speaking Qazaqs stand out as the group least sympathetic toward Ukraine and most open to Russia’s narratives about it. Perhaps most intriguingly, the views of young Russian-speaking Qazaqs are more similar to those held by members of the two Qazaq-speaking groups than to those of older Russian-speaking Qazaqs. What explains this result? Patterns of media consumption appear to be an important factor.

At the outset of the interviews, we delved into our respondents’ media consumption habits. We aimed to understand the extent of their engagement with both domestic and international news and identify their preferred sources of information. When asked about Internet-based news sources, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, and Facebook were mentioned by respondents in all four groups. However, there was a crucial divergence in TV news consumption. Notably, among both Qazaq- and Russian-speakers in the 18-29 age group, consumption of television news was found to be extremely limited. The prevailing reasons cited were a lack of time due to busy schedules; concerns about one-sided and government-influenced TV news content; and the inconvenience of TV’s fixed schedule, which contrasts with the preferences of younger people accustomed to viewing the content of their choice at a time of their choosing. By contrast, TV was

a major source of news for respondents aged 50 and above. The majority of Qazaq-speakers relied on Qazaqstan-based TV channels for news coverage. Older Russian-speaking respondents, meanwhile, reported getting their news from a diverse array of sources, including multiple Russian TV channels.

This clear divergence in media consumption habits goes a long way toward explaining the attitudes found among the four groups in our study. Two processes operate concurrently. First, because Russian propaganda is simply not available in Qazaq, those who consume news entirely in Qazaq (young and old alike) are shielded from it. Second, while Russian channels broadcast with impunity in Qazaqstan, young people no longer rely on TV for news and information. This means that young ethnic Qazaqs who use Russian to learn about world events escape the bulk of Russia's propaganda delivered via television.

Conclusion

While the effectiveness of Russia's formidable propaganda machine is [well-documented](#), the audience receptive to Russia's anti-Ukrainian narratives in Qazaqstan is small and shrinking. This process is propelled by the inexorable force of demographic transformation: the share of ethnic Qazaqs in the population is growing rapidly, with the result that Qazaq language is increasingly prevalent in the country's largest cities. Of the four groups of ethnic Qazaqs under study, only older Russian-speakers were open to Russian narratives about Ukraine. Thus, while the shadow of Russian colonial domination of Qazaqstan is long, it is visibly fading. Ukraine's heroic resistance against Russia's attempt to turn back time is accelerating this process.

Attitudes toward Russia's War on Ukraine in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 867

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Hannah S. Chapman¹
University of Oklahoma

Raushan Zhandayeva
George Washington University

In October, Russian President Vladimir Putin [traveled](#) to Kyrgyzstan for a summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States. This was Putin's first known trip abroad since the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for his arrest in March on allegations of war crimes related to the unlawful deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children. Russia's war on Ukraine has fundamentally [altered](#) Russia's role in Central Asia and led the governments of Central Asia to [reassess](#) their relationships with Russia. While they have [avoided](#) publicly supporting Russia's invasion, trade between Russia and the countries of Central Asia has [boomed](#) and Putin has held an unprecedented number of meetings with his counterparts in the region.

But how does the public in Central Asia view Russia's war against Ukraine? This memo provides a preliminary examination of public attitudes toward the invasion in two Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Using data from [Central Asia Barometer](#) surveys conducted in the months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine (May-June 2022), we find that, in general, Kyrgyzstanis are less likely to hold Russia responsible for the conflict and to believe Russia's actions to be unjustified than their counterparts in Kazakhstan.

We then explore a number of specific factors commonly considered to impact political attitudes toward foreign powers and their behaviors, namely ethnic identity, language, and media usage. Initial results suggest that ethnic Russians are more likely to express pro-Russian attitudes than individuals from other ethnic groups in both countries. The association of Russian language with pro-Russian

¹ Hannah S. Chapman is the Theodore Romanoff Assistant Professor of Russian Studies, and Assistant Professor of International and Area Studies, at the University of Oklahoma. Raushan Zhandayeva is a Ph.D. student at the George Washington University.

attitudes, however, is less consistent and varies across issue areas and political contexts. Finally, while there is some evidence of a link between Russian television viewership and pro-Russian attitudes in both countries, the impact thereof is moderated by the declining role of Russian media in the region.

Attitudes toward Russia’s War in Ukraine

In general, individuals in Kazakhstan are more critical of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine than those in Kyrgyzstan: 44% of respondents in Kazakhstan stated that Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine was either somewhat or completely unjustified, compared to 36% in Kyrgyzstan—an 8-percentage-point difference. However, this difference does not extend to views on whether the war is justified. While 34% of respondents in Kyrgyzstan state that the “special military operation” is completely or somewhat justified, compared to 30% in Kazakhstan, the difference between these groups does not reach conventional standards of statistical significance. Rather, the results suggest that individuals in Kyrgyzstan are less likely to articulate attitudes toward the war: 28% of individuals in Kyrgyzstan selected “don’t know” as their response to this question, compared to 23% in Kazakhstan.

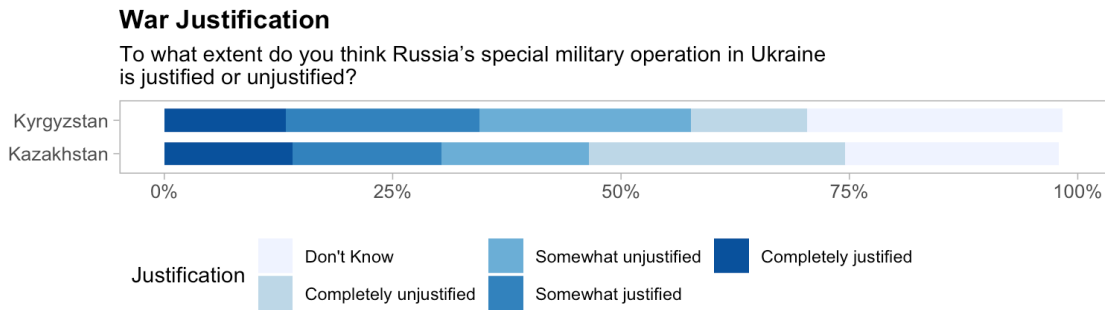


Figure 1. Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of data from Central Asia Barometer surveys.

In general, respondents in Kazakhstan are substantially more likely to blame Russia for the conflict (28%) than individuals in Kyrgyzstan (14%)—more than a 13-percentage-point difference. Looking at those who blame Ukraine for the conflict, this divide is even more apparent: In Kazakhstan, 19% of respondents stated that Ukraine was responsible for the war, compared to nearly 36% in Kyrgyzstan.

However, despite the large differences in blame attribution between the two countries, a substantial portion of respondents in both countries profess uncertainty as to who is responsible for the war. 27% of respondents in Kazakhstan

stated that they did not know who was responsible for the situation in Ukraine, as did 24% of those in Kyrgyzstan.

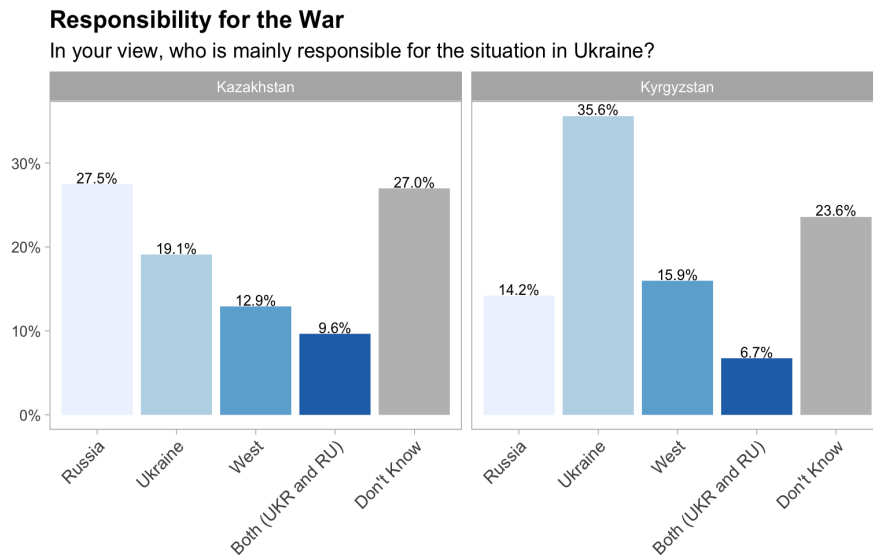


Figure 2. *Source:* Compiled by the authors on the basis of data from Central Asia Barometer surveys.

Finally, individuals in Kazakhstan are less inclined to expect the conflict will end in Russia's favor than their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan. Specifically, 27% of respondents in Kazakhstan anticipate that Ukraine will be compelled to accept Russia's terms, as opposed to 36% in Kyrgyzstan. Even more notably, over 13% of surveyed Kazakhstanis predict that Russia will be forced to retreat, a view shared by a mere 5% of respondents in Kyrgyzstan. Despite these disparities, however, a significant share of individuals in both countries believe that the conflict will culminate in diplomatic negotiations. This suggests a profound divergence in expectations within each country.

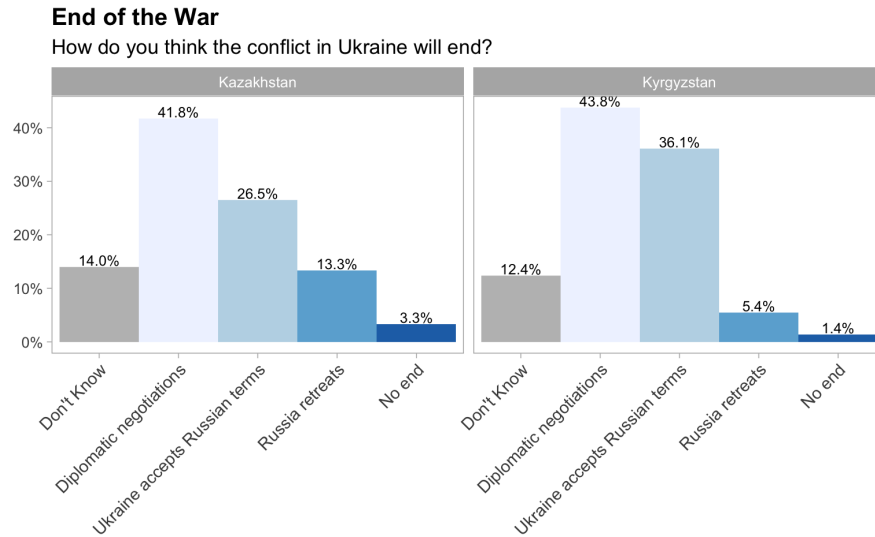


Figure 3. *Source:* Compiled by the authors on the basis of data from Central Asia Barometer surveys.

Ethnicity, Language, and Views of the War

In general, preliminary results suggest that people in Kazakhstan hold more negative attitudes toward Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, are more likely to blame Russia for the conflict, and are less likely to believe that the war will end in Russia’s favor than people in Kyrgyzstan. But what factors are associated with support for or opposition to the war? In this section, we focus on three potential factors: ethnicity, language, and media use. Table 1 presents the estimated probability for the variables examined earlier by ethnicity and language.² Results are purely correlational and do not imply a causal relationship.

Previous research has [suggested](#) that measures of Russian identity, including ethnicity and language preference, have important but variable political implications. Our initial findings provide some support for this argument but also point to important caveats.

In both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Russian ethnicity is consistently associated with pro-Russian attitudes across all measures. Ethnic Russians are more likely to state that the war is justified and less likely to state that the war is unjustified than ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. Moreover, the difference between these groups is substantial: In Kazakhstan, there is an 18-percentage-point difference between

² Our measure here is the language in which the respondent opted to conduct the interview. Tables 1 and 2 show results from multinomial regressions controlling for age, education, sex, income, residency, social media use, and general favorability toward Russia and are clustered by region.

ethnic Russians and ethnic Kazakhs who state that the war is justified (40% v. 22%); in Kyrgyzstan, the difference between ethnic Russians and ethnic Kyrgyz reaches 20 percentage points (53% v. 33%).

Similarly, ethnic Russians are more likely to believe that the war will end in Russia's favor. In both countries, ethnic Russians are more likely to state that Ukraine will be forced to accept Russia's terms and less likely to state that Russia will be forced to retreat than individuals in other ethnic groups.

Finally, ethnicity is associated with blame attribution in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, though these results are more robust and consistent in Kazakhstan. Ethnic Russians are less likely to blame Russia for the conflict (in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and more likely to blame Ukraine or the West (in Kazakhstan).

Thus, our results suggest that ethnicity is strongly associated with pro-Russian views of the war across issue areas and political context. However, the findings for language preference are more complex.

First, the relationship between Russian language preference and pro-Russian attitudes appears to be dependent upon issue area. In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Russian speakers are more likely to claim that the war is justified than their counterparts who speak the titular language (30% v. 22% in Kazakhstan and 46% v. 31% in Kyrgyzstan). Yet the results regarding expectations about the war's end are inconsistent and, at points, counterintuitive. In Kazakhstan, Russian speakers are more likely to believe that the war will end with Ukraine accepting Russia's terms than Kazakh speakers; language does not appear to be associated with beliefs about whether Russia will be forced to retreat. In Kyrgyzstan, the results are even more surprising. Russian language preference is only correlated with the belief that Russia will be forced to retreat – and contrary to expectations, Russian speakers are *more* likely than Kyrgyz speakers to believe that the war will end with Russia's retreat.

Finally, the salience of language for blame attribution is highly context-specific. There is no evidence to suggest that language preference is associated with blame attribution in Kazakhstan: Kazakh speakers are no more or less likely to blame particular entities for the conflict than Russian speakers. In Kyrgyzstan, while language preference does seem to be associated with blame attribution, this relationship does not align with expectations. Although Russian speakers are (as expected) more likely than Kyrgyz speakers to blame the West for the conflict, they are also more likely to blame Russia for the conflict. These results may be explained in part by differences in response rate: Kyrgyz speakers are more likely than Russian speakers to state that they do not know who is to blame for the conflict (28% v. 18%). However, this is at best a partial explanation for these

counterintuitive results; further research is needed to delve deeper into these findings.

These results support the argument that language should be [disaggregated](#) from ethnicity. Overall, ethnicity appears to be more strongly associated with political preference than does language, a finding that holds across political context and issue area. The salience of language for political attitudes, meanwhile, is both context- and issue-specific: In general, language preference is more strongly associated with attitudes toward the war in Kyrgyzstan than in Kazakhstan, but this relationship is complex and varies between issue areas.

Table 1. Predicted Probabilities by Ethnicity and Language in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Dependent Variables	Kazakhstan						Kyrgyzstan					
	Ethnicity			Language			Ethnicity			Language		
	Russian	Other	Marginal Effects	Russian	Other	Marginal Effects	Russian	Other	Marginal Effects	Russian	Other	Marginal Effects
Who is mainly responsible for the situation in Ukraine?												
Russia	16%	32%	16%	28%	29%	1%	5%	17%	12%	23%	15%	8%
Ukraine	28%	17%	9%	18%	21%	3%	35%	34%	1%	36%	34%	2%
West	13%	8%	5%	11%	9%	3%	25%	15%	10%	20%	15%	15%
To what extent is Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine justified?												
Justified	40%	22%	18%	30%	22%	8%	53%	33%	20%	46%	31%	15%
Unjustified	36%	52%	16%	46%	49%	3%	25%	38%	13%	31%	39%	8%
How do you think the conflict in Ukraine will end?												
Diplomatic Negotiations	45%	46%	1%	42%	45%	3%	32%	44%	12%	39%	44%	5%
Russia retreats	8%	17%	9%	17%	14%	3%	3%	6%	3%	10%	5%	5%
Ukraine accepts Russia’s terms	35%	21%	14%	24%	28%	4%	51%	37%	14%	40%	37%	3%

Note: Predicted probabilities for full models with covariates using Central Asia Barometer survey data. Marginal effects are highlighted in green if the difference between groups have $p < .1$ and red otherwise.

Media Use and Views of the War

Finally, we examine whether turning to Russian sources for international news is associated with holding more pro-Russian attitudes (Table 2). Theories of international media [posit](#) that media will have the strongest impact on foreign audiences in contexts where the sending and receiving countries share high degrees of political and cultural resonance and value proximity – as with Russian media in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. However, research in these contexts has [demonstrated](#) that this relationship is dependent on the issue at hand and that Russian television has, at best, a moderate and conditional influence on political attitudes. Given this tension, is Russian media usage associated with more pro-Russian attitudes toward the war in Ukraine?

Table 2. Predicted Probabilities by Media Use in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan						
Dependent Variables	Kazakhstan			Kyrgyzstan		
	Russian media	Other	Marginal Effects	Russian media	Other	Marginal Effects
Who is mainly responsible for the situation in Ukraine?						
Russia	20%	30%	10%	10%	18%	8%
Ukraine	25%	19%	6%	49%	35%	14%
West	17%	10%	7%	18%	17%	1%
To what extent is Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine justified?						
Justified	44%	27%	17%	44%	36%	8%
Unjustified	38%	49%	11%	31%	40%	9%
How do you think the conflict in Ukraine will end?						
Diplomatic Negotiations	33%	45%	12%	38%	44%	6%
Russia retreats	11%	16%	5%	4%	6%	2%
Ukraine accepts Russia’s terms	49%	24%	25%	51%	37%	14%

Note: Predicted probabilities for full models with covariates using Central Asia Barometer data. Marginal effects are highlighted green if the difference between groups have $p < .1$ and red otherwise.

Results suggest that Russian media use is indeed associated with pro-Russian views about the war, although there is some variation by issue area and political context. In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, individuals who turn to Russian television as their primary source of information are more likely to state that Russia's invasion is justified and less likely to state that it is unjustified than individuals who primarily use alternative news sources, all else being equal. Moreover, this difference is particularly strong in Kazakhstan, where there is a 17-percentage-point difference between Russian TV viewers and other groups. Similarly, Russian TV viewers are more likely to accept that the war will end in Russia's favor, with Ukraine being forced to accept Russia's terms.

The link between Russian media use and blame attribution is more mixed. While there is some evidence that users of Russian media are more likely to hold attitudes consistent with Russian messaging, these findings are inconsistent. In Kyrgyzstan, Russian TV viewers are less likely to blame Russia for the conflict, but no more or less likely to blame other parties. In Kazakhstan, meanwhile, Russian media users are more likely to blame the West for the war, but no more or less likely to blame Russia or Ukraine.

These findings underscore the role of media consumption patterns in shaping political preferences. Once again, however, these patterns vary across issue areas and political context.

Importantly, there has been a visible decline in reliance on traditional Russian media as a source of political information in recent years. When this survey was fielded in the summer of 2022, a mere 8% of respondents in Kyrgyzstan and 4% in Kazakhstan depended on traditional Russian media sources for news on international events. This stands in stark contrast to the scenario in 2014-2015, when approximately 60% of the population in Kyrgyzstan [turned](#) to Russian television for political news.

While the association between Russian media use and pro-Russian attitudes remains relatively consistent, the dwindling viewership implies that Russian media are likely to influence fewer people over time. This shift can be attributed to increasing preference for the internet as a key source of news, which represents a significant transformation of media consumption habits. Thus, while Russian media continue to play a role in shaping pro-Russian attitudes, their influence is waning due to the changing media landscape.

Conclusion

Our study provides initial evidence that, overall, the public in Kazakhstan is less supportive of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine than the public in Kyrgyzstan. On

the surface, this result is not necessarily surprising. Despite continued strong ties with Russia, the government of Kazakhstan has long pursued a multi-vector foreign policy that has sought to balance between competing world powers. Russia's invasion may also have tapped into long-standing fears that Kazakhstan will someday become a target of Russian imperialism due to its shared border with Russia and large ethnic Russian minority population. Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, is more economically dependent upon Russia: Russia is one of Kyrgyzstan's most important trade and economic partners, and remittances from Russia make up a substantial portion of Kyrgyzstan's GDP.

The study reveals that ethnicity, language preference, and media use play important but nuanced roles in shaping attitudes toward Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan consistently express more pro-Russian attitudes and hold views more consistent with Russian narratives surrounding the war than their counterparts from titular ethnic groups. Russian language preference, meanwhile, is less consistently related to pro-Russian attitudes and varies by issue area and political context, a finding that underscores the importance of disaggregating various measures of ethnolinguistic identity. Finally, while Russian media use in both countries is generally associated with pro-Russian attitudes, the impact of traditional Russian media is diminishing due to the shift toward internet-based news sources. These findings highlight the importance of political context and issue area in shaping attitudes toward international events.

The War in Ukraine and Changing Perceptions of Russia in Azerbaijan

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Anar Valiyev¹
ADA University

Fidan Nazamova
ADA University

Azerbaijan-Russia diplomatic relations have gone through many ups and downs in the 32 years since the two countries became independent. In the early years, Baku was rather cold toward Moscow, due mostly to Russian support of separatism in Karabakh and provision of arms to Armenia. Meanwhile, Baku's bold action to force Russia to withdraw troops from Azerbaijan in 1992 (long before Russian troops left Eastern Europe) angered the Kremlin. Following Putin's ascent to power, relations between the two countries improved, although Azerbaijan has remained cautious toward its northern neighbor, pursuing a policy of "silent diplomacy" and "non-irritation." This policy enabled Baku to secure Russian neutrality during the Second Karabakh War in September-November 2020.

The signing of the Russian-Azerbaijani Declaration on Allied Interaction in February 2022 raised relations between the two countries to a new level. In that context, the Russian invasion of Ukraine came as a shock to Azerbaijan's elite, to the public in general, and especially to young people. In the two years that have followed, Azerbaijan's elites have tried to tread cautiously, even while affirming their support for the principle of sovereignty and providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine. For its part, Azerbaijani society has been united in support of Ukraine, with many citizens attending rallies and some ethnic Azeris returning from Russia to their homeland. Unlike in other countries, even those who do not openly support the Ukrainian cause have remained silent rather than rallying behind Russia. Finally, young people have reoriented toward the West and Türkiye, even while continuing to recognize Russia's role as a major player in the region. At all levels, the main winner of the geopolitical rethink intensified by the war in

¹ Dr. Anar Valiyev is an Associate Professor at ADA University. Ms. Fidan Namazova is a research associate at ADA University.

Ukraine has been Türkiye, which is now seen as Azerbaijan's best ally and the most desirable destination for youth migration. Support for the US and the EU, meanwhile, remains limited, with the result that Azerbaijani public opinion on Russia is necessarily equivocal.

Elite Perceptions of Russia

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijan has tried to avoid making political statements that openly support either side. Indeed, to this day, the Aliyev administration has not made a single clear-cut statement about the war. However, certain moves by Baku make it possible to elucidate the country's position.

On April 29, 2022, President Ilham Aliyev strongly [supported](#) Ukraine, calling on it to reject the occupation of its territories, although without describing Moscow as the aggressor. Referring to the Western position of appeasement as wrong, he urged Ukrainians to rely on their own forces and not to depend on outside support. Moreover, his assistant Hikmet Hajiyev has [indicated](#) in various statements that the Ukraine war concerns Azerbaijan, stressing the importance of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Baku continues to support Ukraine by providing humanitarian aid and cheap/free oil for powering emergency vehicles, as well as by participating actively in the restoration of infrastructure in Kyiv oblast.

That being said, the reality of having Russia as a neighbor, as well as the presence of peacekeeping forces in Karabakh, has forced Azerbaijan to balance between Russia and Ukraine/the West. To wit, despite providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine, Baku has declined to join any sanctions on Russia.

The invasion of Ukraine has fostered widespread uncertainty in the region and in some ways narrowed Baku's room for maneuver. However, Russia's focus on Ukraine has also brought some benefits for Azerbaijan when it comes to acting in its political and economic interests. The country is, for instance, in the process of diversifying its economic partners, taking advantage of the opportunities available as a "neutral" state. One example is the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy [signed](#) between Azerbaijan and the EU on July 18, 2022.

Geopolitically, the invasion has altered Azerbaijani elites' perceptions of Russia. As throughout the Eurasian region, the question on everyone's lips has been "Who's next?" Complete trust in Russia is impossible in the current context. Accordingly, a study conducted among Azerbaijani political experts [found](#) that equal influence of NATO, Türkiye, and Russia in the Black Sea region would be the ideal balance of military power for fostering regional stability and security.

The perception of Türkiye as the best guarantor of stability and ally for Azerbaijan has been increasing in recent years. This, along with Ankara's support during the Second Karabakh War, has motivated Baku to prioritize security and military cooperation with Türkiye, which was less visible in the past.

Azerbaijani Society's Perceptions of Russia

Given that Azerbaijan is a post-Soviet country that continues to host a number of Russian schools and Russian-speakers, as well as that Russians are the largest minority group within the country, society has displayed some degree of partiality toward Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, political events and shifts in the region have also affected societal perceptions. In contrast to many countries in Eurasia, the war in Ukraine has not led to divisions between political elites and society; instead, the country has been united in its attitude toward the Russian aggression.

Intimately familiar with the pain of unresolved territorial problems, as well as the sovereignty issues and instability occasioned thereby, society immediately expressed its support for Ukraine. The "grand rally" in front of the Ukrainian embassy in early March 2022 is a perfect example of the Azerbaijani people's support for Ukraine. These street protests against Russian aggression also demonstrated the public's dissatisfaction with Moscow's support for separatism in Karabakh and elsewhere. The public actively supported Ukraine on social media and initiated several humanitarian campaigns to help Ukrainians.

Open anger toward Russia has grown. This has been fueled by the return of a number of ethnic Azerbaijanis to their historical motherland. Some have returned purely for economic reasons, but a significant proportion are opposed to the war, mobilization, and the Putin regime.

Finally, while some segments of Azerbaijani society may not actively support Ukraine, nor do they openly express support for Russia. Instead, they simply remain passive and do not indicate a position.

Azerbaijani Youth's Perceptions of Russia

Young people aged 14 to 29 comprise 22.7 percent of Azerbaijan's population. This makes it important to analyze this group's perception of and position toward the ongoing geopolitical shifts in the region.

Even if just one-fifth of young people indicate being somewhat or very interested in politics, certain shared opinions on politics and foreign affairs can be identified among the country's youth. Like the rest of the population, youth evaluate Russian

aggression toward Ukraine negatively and support the country’s territorial integrity. For some, at least, the war in Ukraine harks back to the war in Azerbaijan in the early 1990s.

The concerns with sovereignty that the war has raised have in some ways changed young people’s perceptions of Russia. For example, when young people are given a choice between the “West” and “Russia,” a plurality (48 percent) now lean toward the “West,” although intermediate positions such as “no polarization is preferable” are also widespread (16 percent). Such distrust of Russia has been rising for the last decade but has been accentuated in recent years by the invasion of Ukraine and Russia’s maneuvering in Karabakh.

Moreover, the vast majority of young people (89 percent) state that Türkiye is the closest friend of Azerbaijan. This position is so dominant that the second- (Russia – five percent) and third-ranked (Pakistan – two percent) countries do not even exceed five percent. Taken together, the EU countries only [reach](#) one percent.

But even as Azerbaijani youth have been becoming more sympathetic to Türkiye and more skeptical of Russia, they have not come to ignore Russia’s influence in the region. While young people are inclined to believe that deeper integration with Türkiye is more likely (89 percent) to enable Azerbaijan to progress than integration with Russia (55 percent), significant proportions nevertheless [believe](#) that cooperation with Russia will contribute to Azerbaijan’s economic growth (44 percent), the protection of human rights in the country (27 percent), and Azerbaijan’s national security (17 percent). Table 1 compares Azerbaijani youth’s analysis of the value of cooperation with the EU, Russia, and Türkiye in these areas.

Table 1. Azerbaijani Young People’s Perceptions of the Value of Cooperation with the EU, Russia, and Türkiye, by Settlement Type

	Settlement Type		
	Capital	Urban	Rural
EU Countries			
Azerbaijan’s economic Growth	44%	34%	32%
Protection of human rights	29%	32%	33%
Azerbaijan’s national security	15%	8%	11%
Russia			
Azerbaijan’s economic growth	84%	34%	32%
Protection of human rights	59%	19%	18%

Azerbaijan's national security	29%	14%	14%
Türkiye			
Azerbaijan's economic growth	98%	78%	87%
Protection of human rights	96%	70%	79%
Azerbaijan's national security	97%	86%	90%

Source: Compiled by the authors on the basis of a 2023 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung [study](#) of Azerbaijani youth

Additionally, Russia remains among the top three actual destinations for youth migration from Azerbaijan, far ahead of the USA. The most desirable destinations [are](#) Türkiye (39 percent), Germany (16 percent), Russia (12 percent), and the US (seven percent).

At present, young people do not see Russia as representing a major threat to Azerbaijan due to Russia's weakness. The withdrawal of the Russian peacekeepers from Nagorno-Karabakh only strengthened this perception.

Conclusion

Overall, Azerbaijani public opinion is ambivalent in its assessment of the war in Ukraine. To be sure, the public, elites, and youth do not support—and even condemn—the Russian invasion. Nevertheless, growing anti-Russian sentiment has not resulted in a rise in support for the US or the EU. Indeed, Western countries have come in for criticism from the Azerbaijani public due to what the latter perceives as their insufficient military support for Ukraine and lack of a unified front against Russia. Moreover, the public is infuriated by the seeming hypocrisy of the EU and the US in condemning Russian separatism in eastern Ukraine and the occupation of Crimea, even as they gave little support to the Azerbaijani cause in the face of Armenian separatism in Karabakh. With support for the West limited, Azerbaijan's position on Russia remains necessarily equivocal.



Institute for
European, Russian,
and Eurasian Studies

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