

eu candidacy    labor migration  
russian aggression  
geostrategic balance  
gas and values    chinese influence  
energy independence

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STRATEG**EAST**  
**WESTERNIZATION**  
**REPORT**  
**2023**

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karabakh conflict resolution  
pro-russian parties  
**hereditary power**  
large-scale westernization  
ethnic russians    infrastructure integration  
development strategy



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# ABOUT STRATEG EAST

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StrategEast Center for a New Economy has the mission to reinforce the values of the rule of law and private property protection in Eurasian countries through the transition from natural-resource-based to knowledge-driven economies.

Its work is focuses on the 14 countries that proclaimed or restored their independence after the collapse of the USSR: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>Introduction</b>	6
<b>Armenia:</b> Yerevan in Search of Ways to Resolve the Conflict with Azerbaijan	8
<b>Azerbaijan:</b> The EU Seeks to Expand Energy Cooperation with Baku	14
<b>Belarus:</b> Complicity in Russian Military Aggression	18
<b>Estonia:</b> Politicians' Fight for Party Support Highlights Complex Relationship with the Russian Population	23
<b>Georgia:</b> EU Candidate Status vs European Perspective – Failure Sold as an Achievement	29
<b>Kazakhstan:</b> Astana Searches for Ways to Make up its Geostrategic Balance	33
<b>Kyrgyzstan:</b> Russia's War in Ukraine Opened Gates to Change in Kyrgyz Labor Migration	37
<b>Latvia:</b> The Likely Demise of Pro-Russian Politics	42
<b>Lithuania:</b> The Final Decoupling from Russia's Energy Supply	47
<b>Moldova:</b> Amid Energy Crisis, Chisinau Eyes to Strengthen its Energy Independence	51
<b>Tajikistan:</b> China is Pushing Russia out of the Country	55
<b>Turkmenistan:</b> Power Handed Down from Father to Son	60
<b>Ukraine:</b> The Russian War Provoked a Large-Scale Westernization Process	64
<b>Uzbekistan:</b> The New Development Strategy 2022-2026 Showed First Results	68
<b>References</b>	72
<b>Authors' Biographies</b>	90

# INTRODUCTION



Photo by Alexander Kozachenko

Two years ago, we released the Westernization Report and shared the 2020 results. The defining event for that year was the COVID pandemic, which had an impact on almost all post-Soviet countries and the greatest influence on their development. Last year, 2022, was again overshadowed by a single event, which dominated nearly all of our experts' analytical materials – the war unleashed by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which reverberated throughout the whole region.

While Russia is currently waging a full-scale hot war against Ukraine alone, it continues to fight cold wars against every single other country that declared or regained its independence after the collapse of the USSR.

Prior to 2022, Russia passed off its attempts at increasing its influence in the region as “cooperation”. The leaders of neighboring countries either believed this, or at least they pretended to. Over the last year, we have seen this “cooperation” morph into a series of operations aimed at forcing

loyalty. Russia has shown it is willing to weaponize any leverage available to it in these wars.

When it comes to energy, our experts from Lithuania, Moldova, and Azerbaijan focused on changes to the energy sector as the past year's main event. Lithuania has completely abandoned the purchase of Russian energy, while Moldova has diversified its supplies, and Azerbaijan has cooperated with the European Union in an attempt to partially replace Russia as a reliable gas supplier to Europe.

Ethnic Russian segments of the population, from Latvia and Estonia in the Baltic States to Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, still play a major role in domestic politics. At the same time, it is clear that in all three countries, experts describe that population's diminishing loyalty to the Russian Federation in the wake of the war in Ukraine.

**Finally, since February 24, 2022, Russia's military presence around the region has often been seen as a direct threat to sovereignty and territorial integrity.**

Belarus is now de facto partially occupied by Russia. In contrast, much of the Russian military presence in Armenia has left, as a significant part of the so-called “Russian peacekeepers” have been transferred from bases in Armenia and the Lachin corridor in Nagorno Karabakh to the Ukrainian front. Meanwhile, Tajikistan has begun to gradually shift toward China militarily.

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**The main aim of this Westernization Report is to identify trends in the Westernization of the post-Soviet space. Paradoxically, Ukraine, which has historically been subjected to the most severe trials, has now become the leader of this movement.**

The West's main efforts in the region have been focused here, and against the backdrop of war, Ukraine was nominated as a candidate for membership to the European Union.

Moldova, which was also granted status as an EU candidate country in 2022, has also achieved a high assessment of its European integration efforts. Other countries with unequivocally positive Westernization trends are: Azerbaijan, which has become Europe's new gas partner;

Kyrgyzstan, which has begun diversifying its foreign economic relations; Uzbekistan, which has embarked on significant economic reforms; and the three Baltic countries, which have taken yet another step towards parting with the Soviet past. In Lithuania, these changes are infrastructural in nature, while in Latvia and Estonia, they are cultural and historical.

Belarus and Georgia have obviously moved backwards in their paths toward Westernization. Georgia even received a temporary refusal for EU candidate country status, and Belarus was actually forced to cede a significant part of its own sovereignty.

The other countries that appear in our report have shown less obvious consequences of recent global events, and we will not see their impact on Westernization until our next Westernization Index, which will be published in 2024.

Sincerely,  
Anatoly Motkin,  
President of StratEast



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# ARMENIA:

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## Yerevan in Search of Ways to Resolve the Conflict with Azerbaijan

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**Boris Navasardian**

After Armenia's 44-day war with Azerbaijan in 2020, its relations with the West, like so many other things in Armenia, have been determined by security considerations and the prospects for conflict resolution. The entire post-war period was followed by a decline of Moscow's authority in Armenian society, loud voices from political and public figures clamoring for withdrawal from Russian-led associations – namely the EAEU and the CSTO<sup>1</sup>, the closure of the Russian 102nd military base in Gyumri, and strengthened cooperation with NATO and its Member States. Mentions of the Armenian-Russian stra-

tegic alliance are often viewed with a tinge of irony. This trend has increased significantly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. 2022, however, has become a year for radical changes in Armenia's official position, which, despite deepening contradictions in bilateral relations, was long tied to Moscow's geopolitical endeavors.

### DISENCHANTMENT WITH RUSSIA'S SECURITY UMBRELLA

Back in January 2022, Armenia, which chaired the CSTO, took an active part in sending a military force to Kazakhstan, and the Armenian Prime



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Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, proudly noted his contribution to transforming the organization from something amorphous in the context of the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation into the structure that allocated specific, practical tasks to its members. Even so, just nine months later, at the CSTO summit in Yerevan to celebrate the conclusion of the Armenian presidency, Pashinyan refused to sign the final declaration<sup>2</sup>, as the draft lacked an assessment of the advance of Azerbaijani troops deep within Armenian territory in September 2022, resulting in the death of more than 200 Armenian members of the military and civilians. According to the Prime Minister, Armenia will not be able to build relations with the organization until the CSTO's area of responsibility has been clarified.

In mid-December 2022, Yerevan had good reason to express its dissatisfaction with Moscow directly. A group of Azerbaijani citizens, who claimed to be eco-activists and, according to many estimates, are supported by authorities in Baku, blocked the Lachin Corridor – the only road connecting Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh (NK). According to the sixth paragraph of the tripartite Statement<sup>3</sup> of the Presidents of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Armenia dated November 9, 2020, this five-kilometer-wide corridor should be under the control of Russian peacekeepers for a period of five years, but they were unable to ensure the unhindered passage people and goods in both directions. The Armenian authorities demanded that the Russian Federation secure the corridor's operational continuity, and if it was incapable of performing this function, that international peacekeeping troops be sent to the region with a mandate from the UN Security Council. The Armenian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ararat Mirzoyan, refused to participate in the meeting scheduled at the end of December with Russian and Azerbaijani counterparts, on the grounds that he needed to ensure uninterrupted communication between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>4</sup>

The crisis in relations between Yerevan and Moscow continued to escalate in early 2023. On January 1, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced CSTO peacekeeping troops training, "Indestructible Brotherhood – 2023" in Armenia. As reported, the military had to work out issues related to joint planning of military operations and tactical actions to neutralize any illegal armed formations. However, on January 10, Nikol Pashinyan announced at a press conference that the Armenian Ministry of Defense believes it would be unwise to carry out such a plan.<sup>5</sup> To summarize his explanation, those exercises might provoke new aggression from Armenia's neighbors. Since recent months have shown that Yerevan's CSTO partners are not inclined to intervene in such situations, Armenia will once again find itself facing threats alone.

## THE ROCKY ROAD TO AN ALTERNATIVE

At the same time, it is too soon to draw a direct parallel between Armenia's rapidly cooling relations with Russia and the increasing presence of the West in both Armenian and regional political life. On the one hand, two events in December 2021 – the formation of the Brussels negotiating platform between Armenia and Azerbaijan at the initiative of European Council President Charles Michel, and US President Joe Biden's inviting to Armenia and Georgia to attend the Summit for Democracy, which took place just three days later, gave the pro-Western factions in Armenian society reason for optimism and hope for lasting peace. On the other hand, the war in Ukraine, which diverted US and EU attention from the Southern Caucasus, as well as the inconsistent choice of mediators by Baku and Yerevan, delayed any prospects for a peace agreement. The follow-ups of each new round of Brussels negotiations (April 7, May 22, and August 31, 2022) between Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev grew increasingly critical and detached from the real problems at hand. Meetings under three other negotiating formats (as the USA was

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an active participant in organizing them), between Armen Grigoryan, Secretary of Security Council of the Republic of Armenia, and Hikmet Hajiyev, Assistant of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Deputy Prime Ministers Mher Grigoryan and Shahin Mustafayev, and Foreign Ministers Ararat Mirzoyan and Jeyhun Bayramov, had a more specific agenda. These meetings addressed the issues of demarcation lines and boundary delimitation, enabling of transport communications, and the text of the peace agreement. However, progress depended entirely on whether highest-ranking figures would find a common language.

In addition, the boundary and communications problems were subject to intense debate during a trilateral format with participation from Alexei Overchuk, Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. Unlike Western mediators, the Russians are pushing through their substantive involvement in the processes (particularly the use of the former USSR General Staff's maps and the role of the Federal Security Service (FSB) in controlling of the Meghri Pass connecting "mainland" Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan exclave, specified in the statement issued on November 9, 2022), the practical significance of these meetings remains more fundamental. Despite Moscow's weakening position as a regional geopolitical player, the interconnected nature between various agendas and prospects for a peace agreement mean that it is able to occasionally leverage the mediation initiative to its favor. In other words, Moscow strives to bind itself to communication and economic development in the Southern Caucasus and managing the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. The West, in contrast, prefers to carry out the negotiation process via the general-to-specific method, i.e. signing a peace agreement based on generally accepted principles of international law, which will pave the way for a broad spectrum of cooperation and projects ensuring the development of both individual countries as well as the entire South Caucasus region, in line with Euro-Atlantic strategies.

**Based on the numerous statements from the international community condemning Azerbaijan's actions against Armenia following the escalation on September 13-14<sup>6</sup>, there is reason to assume that the West is ready to take responsibility for resolving this conflict. On September 18, US Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi visited Yerevan.<sup>7</sup> The main message from the third-most powerful American leader was that the US will continue to support Armenia and oppose any changes to its border. More specifically, Pelosi stated that she had come to hear what the United States can do for Armenia, including in the area of defense cooperation.**

On October 6, the "European Political Community" opened in Prague, a new platform for international dialogue among democratic states at the initiative of France.<sup>8</sup> The central theme of the event

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was the war in Ukraine, and Azerbaijan and Armenia also received serious attention. The summit follow-up statement noted that the parties recognized each other's territorial integrity. This was seen as an almost final victory for the European negotiating platform, and there were hopes of signing a peace agreement before the end of 2022. Pelosi's statements and the Prague agreements were followed by practical steps: on October 18, the EU sent a two-month mission of observers to the Armenian-Azerbaijani border.<sup>9</sup> Though Azerbaijan would only agree to the presence of these civilian observers in Armenian territory, such a step symbolized the inability of Russian peacekeeping troops to ensure security. Moreover, on January 23, 2023, the European Union decided to send a long-term European mission to the region.<sup>10</sup>

Such a scenario could become synonymous with Moscow's gradual but inevitable withdrawal from the Southern Caucasus. Yet, Russian leadership has managed, at least for a while, to return its priorities to the negotiating table. At the same time, Russia used a peculiar interpretation of the "carrot and stick" approach when the "carrot" was offered to Azerbaijan, and the "stick" was applied to Armenia. Such "discrimination" of a strategic ally is due to Moscow's growing interest in close cooperation with Ankara and Baku, which have long held deep animosities toward Yerevan. This interest has grown in recent years, as Russians relations with the West have deteriorated. The war against Ukraine and the tightening of anti-Russian sanctions gave Turkey and, to a certain extent, Azerbaijan the status of uncontested export-import partners to the Russian Federation. In addition, the so-called "competitive partnership" between Moscow and Ankara allows them to overcome contradictions and enter into cooperation models in Syria, Iraq, Libya – wherever it is easier for both of them to find a common language with one other rather than with the West. This means that whenever Russia has to sacrifice Armenian interests in exchange for an agreement with Turkey and Azerbaijan, it does so without hes-

itation. As Moscow's position worsens, both on the Ukrainian front and in relations with the West, it is forced to make greater concessions to its "competitive partners." It is no coincidence that many observers drew a connection between the lack of an adequate response from Russia and the CSTO to the September 13-14 escalation and the liberation of Izyum by the Armed Forces of Ukraine, as well as between the blockade of the Lachin corridor and the retreat of Russian troops in southern Ukraine, including the liberation of Kherson.

The direct connection between Azerbaijan's growing ambitions in the conflict with Armenia and Moscow's role and heft in the reconciliation process was once again confirmed at the trilateral meeting between Aliyev, Pashinyan, and Putin in Sochi on October 31, 2022,<sup>11</sup> during which the Russian President managed to block, or at least, slow down a process launched by the formation of the Brussels negotiating platform, Charles Michel, Nancy Pelosi's trip to Armenia, the discussion of a peace agreement at the European Political Community summit in Prague, and the dispatch of an EU monitoring mission. Azerbaijan's interests were in no way affected by this turn of events. There is no doubt that after the Sochi meeting, Baku negotiated new promises from Moscow regarding the return of Nagorno-Karabakh under its control. In any case, it was at this stage that Russia finally did withdraw its proposal to indefinitely postpone a decision on the status of NK, thus allowing Azerbaijan to exert pressure on the Karabakh Armenians. Moreover, unlike the West, Moscow's peacekeeping troops are present on the ground, and it can therefore favor bringing Baku's practical plans to life. Moreover, as noted above, failures in Ukraine are making Russia increasingly compliant to Baku's and Ankara's will. Russia's sabotaging the peace agreement should worry Azerbaijan less than Armenia – a fact stated by Ilham Aliyev himself.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, under the futile pretext of "joint efforts" by Baku and Yerevan, the fifth round of Brussels negotiations scheduled for early Decem-

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ber 2022 was disrupted when Aliyev refused to participate so long as French President Emmanuel Macron was present. On the contrary, Pashinyan would not take part unless Macron attended. Moscow turned to traditional means to coerce Armenia into an about-face-threat to revise Russian gas prices, control over Armenia's energy system, transport communications issues (Armenia's main cargo turnover with the outside world passes through the Russian-Georgian border) and denying Pashinyan of any political support. In short, they were the same arguments used in September 2013, when Russia forced then-President Serzh Sargsyan to pull out of signing an Association Agreement with the EU.<sup>13</sup>

## PROSPECTS DEPEND ON YEREVAN'S DECISIVENESS

Though we must admit that things are not entirely the same as a decade ago, Russia is no longer able to bolster its image in Armenia as the guarantor of their security and a powerful ally. The leverage of Moscow's influence on the internal political alignment in Armenia has weakened, and the balance of economic importance for one another has significantly shifted in Yerevan's favor. Yerevan considers India as a more promising arms supplier than Russia, and Iran as a more consistent defender of its territorial integrity. Over the last three years, France has firmly taken the place of Armenia's closest friend. Armenian sympathies for the Russian Federation have plummeted since the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the divide between the Armenian and Russian government models, as illustrated by the most authoritative international ratings on levels of democracy.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the first round of EU-Armenia dialogue on politics and security held on January 26 in Yerevan may become a breakthrough event.<sup>16</sup> Neither the CEPA or the Armenian version of the Association Agreement disrupted in 2013 envisaged such an ambitious agenda.

The correlation between all of the circumstances determining Armenia's foreign relations and security priorities point to challenges in reorienting its geopolitical trajectory, largely due to indecisiveness and inconsistency from Yerevan. The turbulent negotiations with Azerbaijan, along with Armenia's prospects for comprehensive development are evidence of this. Armenia failed to properly take advantage of both the framework of the Comprehensive & Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU,<sup>17</sup> as well as the € 2.6 billion in assistance offered by Brussels in July 2021 for five strategic directions to overcome the socioeconomic crisis.<sup>18</sup> Western efforts in mediating negotiations with Baku have shown that while Armenian representatives have displayed inconstancy, Azerbaijan has responded with obstinance. This had a negative impact in 2022, and both Washington and Brussels sought to avoid proactive participation in shaping the agenda dialogue, limiting themselves to acting as mere moderators.

At the same time, objective factors continue to hint that as a state, Armenia has no alternative to Westernization as a key direction in its development. Though Western sanctions against Russia have led the latter to increased trade and closer economic relations with Armenia, we have every reason to speak about a trend toward the reconsideration of Yerevan's external politics vector. Tens of thousands of Russian citizens have relocated to Armenia, a determining factor in the Armenian economy's 13% growth rate and 2,000 new companies, mainly in the IT sector. This has in fact strengthened interaction with Western businesses and the introduction of appropriate standards for economic relations. Passenger traffic, including transit one, has risen, expanding Armenia's flight connections with European countries – the number of destinations in 2022 increased by about one third, accounting for 14 in all.<sup>19</sup> By January 2023, restrictions on Armenian airlines flying to the EU, which were introduced in 2020, had been withdrawn. Many Russian new arrivals are strong opponents of the war and Kremlin regime, and have been both

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initiators and active participants in joint protests against Russian policies. Their political views are also determined by their cultural needs and in line with local trends:<sup>20</sup> both traditional events (posters for the Golden Apricot Film Festival, and Yerevan

Jazz Festival), and new ones, such as the 2022 International Junior Eurovision Song Contest, the first licensed “Hard Rock Cafe” in the region opening in Yerevan speak volumes about Armenia’s further civilizational integration with the West.

# AZERBAIJAN:

## The EU Seeks to Expand Energy Cooperation With Baku

**Nataliya Butyrskaya**

### STRENGTHENING ENERGY COOPERATION

On July 18, 2021, during the visit of Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, a new Memorandum of Understanding on strategic partnership in the energy sector between Azerbaijan and the EU was signed in Baku<sup>21</sup>. The current dialogue on energy between the EU and Azerbaijan covers many areas: oil, gas, renewable energy, hydrogen, energy efficiency, and more. Azerbaijan is becoming a key partner for the European Union in its efforts to step away from Russian fossil fu-

els. The new agreement is intended to strengthen the existing partnership between the parties, which guarantees stable and reliable gas supplies to the EU through the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC). It also lays the foundation for a long-term partnership in energy efficiency and clean energy, in line with the goals of the Paris Agreement.

According to the Memorandum, the parties agreed to double the Southern Gas Corridor's capacity to supply the EU – to at least 20 billion cubic meters per year by 2027. The SGC plays a strategic role in the EU's diversification of gas, in particular for the countries of South-Eastern Europe. It is a gigantic infrastructure and a global project measuring 3,500



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km for gas transportation from the Caspian Sea to Turkey within the framework of the Shah Deniz project, and from there to Europe (along the segment of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) network included in this corridor). Azerbaijan began exporting gas to Europe on December 31, 2020, with an annual volume of 8.1 billion cubic meters. In 2022, Azerbaijan increased this figure to 11.4 billion cubic meters, amounting to 3.4% of the EU's total gas imports.

The EU provided significant political and financial support toward building the SGC. Further expansion ensures that Southern Europe's gas infrastructure will modernize. Last October, Greece and Bulgaria launched an interconnector through which Azerbaijani gas is to be supplied to Bulgaria, with the prospect of expanding transportation to Serbia, North Macedonia, Romania, and Moldova. Also, gas operators in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia have offered to increase transport supplies of Azerbaijani gas through their networks to Central Europe.

The European Union is Azerbaijan's largest trading partner and main export market. The EU accounts for 52% of Azerbaijan's foreign trade and 65.6% of its total exports.<sup>22</sup> In 2022, trade volume between Azerbaijan and the EU peaked at \$27.3 billion. The EU is also one of Azerbaijan's most important investment sources, with FDI in excess of €7 billion.

## CAUTIOUS PARTNERSHIP

Economic relations between Azerbaijan and the EU are largely based on the energy and transport sectors. They have actively cooperated on energy for over 15 years, beginning with the signing of the first Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Strategic Energy Partnership in 2006, and the Joint Declaration on the Southern Gas Corridor in 2011.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the energy sector, Azerbaijan's role is growing as a key transport hub, as part of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), or the Middle Corridor that connects Asia and Europe, bypassing Russia, which is vital given current geopolitical realities.

The EU is also seeking opportunities in Azerbaijan to expand its economic and energy cooperation with the countries of Central Asia, primarily Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan; in this regard, it plans to invest in the development of TITR as part of the Global Gateway initiative, which is the EU's strategy for developing sustainable networks around the world.

The EU is also seeking to expand opportunities to diversify cooperation with Azerbaijan. Bilateral relations are based on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which entered into force in 1999.<sup>24</sup> The current agreement does not include tariff preferences, but eliminates trade quotas between the parties and aims to gradually bring Azerbaijan's standards closer to those of the EU. Since 2004, Azerbaijan has become part of the European Neighborhood Policy, and in 2009, it joined the Eastern Partnership initiative.

**In contrast to Ukraine and Moldova, which have already received EU candidate country status, and Georgia, which has also been received European recognition, Azerbaijan regards the platform as an additional mechanism for expanding cooperation with the EU and aims to achieve gradual rapprochement rather than full integration.**

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In 2017, negotiations commenced on a new comprehensive framework agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan, which aims to expand political dialogue, trade, and mutually beneficial cooperation in a wide range of economic areas. In 2018, the parties coordinated a document “On the priority of partnership” to guide and strengthen relations. The treaty itself, however, is still work in progress due to the inconsistency of some issues: first of all, there is no agreement on common airspace with the EU. Azerbaijan’s membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) is another matter to address. It submitted a request to join the organization in 1997 and received observer status at that time. Azerbaijani leaders did not seek full WTO membership, under the pretext of protecting the domestic market and the interests of domestic producers. In fact, the country is disinterested in opening the market and creating a competitive environment.

### ENERGY AT THE EXPENSE OF VALUES

Azerbaijan’s foreign and domestic political context make it a challenging partner for the EU. Baku’s foreign policy remains a multi-vector approach, as it attempts to balance the interests of various regional forces, particularly Russia, which still has leverage in resolving its dispute with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. In the long-term, Azerbaijan sees itself as part of geographical Europe. However, when it comes to human rights, freedom of speech, the suppression of the opposition and dissent, there are questions surrounding its compliance with European principles. In 2019, President Ilham Aliyev carried out a number of political reforms aimed at “elimination of the country’s shortcomings, removal of problems that worry citizens from the agenda, improvement of the well-being of people, and building a stronger state”.<sup>25</sup> However, according to the Freedom in the World 2023 report on political rights and civil liberties around the world, published by Freedom House, Azerbaijan is still considered a Not

Free country.<sup>26</sup> It is ranked 128 out of 180 in the Corruption Perceptions Index, and ranked 154 in the press freedom rate – standing right between Russia and Belarus.<sup>27</sup> According to human rights activists, last year, there were 99 political prisoners in the country, including activists, politicians, and journalists.<sup>28</sup>

This reality, however, has not hampered cooperation between Baku and Brussels. Over the years, the energy agenda has overshadowed the human rights and civil liberties policies, despite the EU’s statements of a value-oriented identity and democratic principles, drawing criticism from human rights organizations and the Azerbaijani opposition.

### MEDIATION IN ACTION

Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and its global consequences have increased the importance of Azerbaijan in the EU’s energy security, while also raising the Southern Caucasus’s strategic importance and the role of its socio-economic development for European security in general.

In this regard, the EU seeks to play a more active mediating role between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. In May 2022, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev held a rare in-person meeting in Brussels. On January 23, 2023, the European Union announced the expedition of a 100-person observer mission to Armenia for a two-year period, with the goal of promoting stability in the border regions. This is the EU’s first full-fledged and long-term civilian presence in a country that is in a formal security alliance with the Russian Federation. Thus, Moscow loses its exclusive influence over resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh problem and will have to take Brussels’s role into account in its diplomatic relations with Baku and Yerevan. Today, the mission has received unlimited access to the territory of Armenia, though Azerbaijan has not allowed the deployment of any observers to its own territory.



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At the same time, however, Azerbaijan is not against the EU taking part in processes related to resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh situation. This includes support for mine clearance (the EU has already allocated 2.5 million euros for this), as well as participation in the restoration and reconstruction of liberated territories.<sup>29</sup> Baku does not dismiss the EU's ability to play an effective role in normalizing its relations with Armenia and unblocking transport arteries, among other challenging matters.

Relations between Brussels and Baku are not without tensions. European Parliamentarians took a negative view of Azerbaijani environmental activists blocking the Lachin corridor and adopted a resolution calling for its immediate unblocking.

Azerbaijan's growing share of the European energy market and its transformation into an essential partner are significant diplomatic coups for Baku. Additionally, these changes have become an important gesture for Azerbaijan, as a show of its

readiness to assist the EU in overcoming energy challenges posed by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. On the eve of its invasion, Moscow had planned to pressure the EU by signing a Declaration on Allied Cooperation with Baku. Paragraph 25 of that agreement provided that both countries "will refrain from carrying out any economic activity that causes direct or indirect damage to the interests of the other Party."<sup>30</sup> Within just a few months, Azerbaijan had in fact signed a Memorandum on gas exports with the EU, neutralizing the Russian Federation's attempts to negatively influence energy cooperation between Baku and Brussels.

Azerbaijan needs the EU's support to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh situation and establish lasting peace, which will be key to economic and social development in the region, as well as to eliminate Russian geopolitical influence, which is intent on extending the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This will provide additional impetus for rapprochement with the EU.

# BELARUS:

## Complicity in Russian Military Aggression

**Andrei Yahorau**

Belarus's revolutionary movements in 2020 became a turning point in Belarusian post-Soviet history, highlighting the glaring differences between the more Westernized society and the Soviet-oriented government. Though the 2020 protests lacked any direct demands for change in Belarusian geopolitical inclinations, they aimed to democratize the political regime, restore the rule of law, expand the freedom for economic activity, and build space for the grassroots self-organization of civil society. The political mobilization of Belarusian society was based on Western values, and the desired direction of change had an obvious pro-Western character. Belarus's social rebellion

was no accident, but rather the result of a gradual shift in society's fundamental values over the last decade.<sup>31</sup> Belarusian society was drifting from survival values to the values of self-actualization, the desire for greater political and economic freedom. Meanwhile, the Belarusian state remained focused on the suppression of civil liberties, a high degree of state control, and the dominance of the state economy sector. Naturally, this gap was growing. The growth of the private sector of the economy and the development of civil society organizations was followed by the growth of citizens' autonomy from various forms of state control. The 2020 political crisis in Belarus was the direct result of inconsistency between the state and power relations and levels of social development.



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## FROM ANTI-WESTERN COUNTERREVOLUTION TO COMPLICITY IN RUSSIAN AGGRESSION: POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

While the period from 2015 to 2020 was a time of positive shifts toward Westernization for Belarus, following suppression of the protests, there was an anti-Western reaction. Alexander Lukashenko's political regime directed its efforts at undermining the foundations of the Belarusian protest. The constitutional reform of 2022 solidified the non-democratic nature of the Belarusian political system, including the creation of another supreme legislative body, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, which was never based on general democratic elections. Electoral legislation has become even more restrictive in relation to participants' rights in the electoral process. The All-Belarusian People's Assembly is now responsible for resolving any disputes over election legitimacy. 2021-2022 saw a massive wave of Belarusian civil society organizations being demolished. Over 1,000 organizations, including the remnants of independent trade unions, were impacted.<sup>32</sup> It is significant that the liquidation of civil society organizations was accompanied by official rhetoric from government officials and propagandists about the need to eradicate civil society activity because it carries pro-Western values and ideas.<sup>33</sup> Thousands of civil and political activists ended up in prison due to large-scale political repression focused suppressing self-organized protest groups and communities. Most of the independent media were terminated, and new restrictions were introduced to regulate the private economy sector (some tax benefits and a simplified taxation system was abolished, for example, and taxes were increased for residents of the Hi-Tech Park, etc.).<sup>34</sup> After August 2020, the general condition of the rule of law and the work of the judiciary system can be described in terms of "legal default", dominated by the direct use of the entire law enforcement system for political repression.

Belarusian complicity in Russian aggression against Ukraine has further aggravated these trends of Westernization rollback. Since the start of Russia's large-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Lukashenko regime has been facilitating Russian aggression against Ukraine, providing almost all types of possible assistance, with the exception of the direct participation of the Belarusian military in hostilities in Ukrainian territory. Belarus provides its territory to Russian troops for missile strikes, air raids, the transit of Russian military personnel and heavy weapons, and provides all the technical, transport and medical infrastructure for Russian aggression from the within Belarus. It also participates in training the mobilized Russian military in joint Belarusian-Russian training centers. All of this actually makes Belarus a direct accomplice of Russia's aggression.

From the point of view of international law, Belarus is in an ambivalent position: it is an accomplice in aggression (in the sense of *jus ad bellum*) but not a party to an international armed conflict (in the sense of *jus in bello*).<sup>35</sup> The OSCE ODIHR report (April 13, 2022) states that "Although Belarus allows its territory to be used to launch Russian attacks on Ukraine [...] it is not a party to the international armed conflict, as long as it does not itself commit acts of violence or other acts that would constitute direct participation in the hostilities by persons attributable to Belarus"<sup>36</sup>. The EU assessment is more categorical, stating that "Belarus is supporting the Russian military aggression against Ukraine" and is a "co-aggressor".<sup>37</sup> At the official level, Ukraine declares that Belarus is an accomplice to the aggression but continues to maintain diplomatic relations with Belarus, noting that they can be severed if the Belarusian army actually invades.<sup>38</sup> In political terms, Belarus's position exacerbates its political dependence on Russia, giving it an international status close to that of a satellite state or protectorate of the Russian Federation. This growing dependence on Russia is also linked to the ongoing process of deepening integration with Russia. In November 2021, Putin

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and Lukashenko signed a decree of the Union State of Russia and Belarus approving 28 integration programs and a new general military doctrine.<sup>39</sup> These programs severely limit Belarusian state sovereignty in several important institutional areas, including taxation, macroeconomic regulation, customs policy, banking regulation, and financial markets.<sup>40</sup>

#### THE INTERNATIONAL REACTION AND ITS ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES FOR BELARUS

Belarus's violation of international security principles, starting with the hijacking of a Ryanair plane in May 2021, provoking a migration crisis on its borders with the EU,<sup>41</sup> and supporting military aggression, has led to the international community imposing its most severe sanctions regime against Belarus. In addition to the traditional, symbolic sanctions that have been periodically imposed against Belarus since 1996, the current regime includes sectoral economic sanctions, such as: disconnecting some Belarusian banks from SWIFT; freezing parts of national reserves; significant restrictions on financial flows from Belarus to the EU; sanctions against the tobacco sector; restrictions on oil products/minerals and potassium fertilizers; restrictions on the purchase of wood, cement, iron, steel, Belarusian-made rubber; restriction on exports dual-use products and other high technologies to Belarus, as well as many other measures.<sup>42</sup> As a result of these sanctions, Belarus lost about 40% of its exports in physical terms,<sup>43</sup> including all trade with its third (after Russia and the EU) trading partner – Ukraine, and most of the trade with its second trading partner, the EU. Russia is practically Belarus's only major partner in foreign trade, with a share of about 60-70%.<sup>44</sup> Despite statements by the Belarusian authorities about growing trade with China and other Asian countries, this cannot compensate for the loss of the European and Ukrainian markets.<sup>45</sup>

**Due to its complicity in aggression and the impact of international sanctions, cooperation with Belarus has become toxic, which has driven many international brands to leave the Belarusian market, including IKEA, Intel, Bolt, Booking.com, Maersk, MAN, and others.<sup>46</sup> International business refuses to work with Belarusian contractors or international companies with Belarusian roots. Large international companies previously registered in Belarus are relocating and changing their jurisdiction.<sup>47</sup>**

In an attempt to prevent the exodus of big business, in 2022, Belarusian authorities banned the foreign shareholders of 190 companies from selling their shares in statutory funds without special permission from the Ministry of Finance,<sup>48</sup> in early 2023 they expanded the list to almost 1,900 companies.<sup>49</sup>

But even such drastic measures have had little effect on the behavior of the big business. A typical example is the Belarusian IT industry, which previously was the driver of the Belarusian economy, showing 10% growth per year. Today, we can see

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the death of the Belarusian IT miracle: companies are leaving Belarus, employment in this sector is falling dramatically, and as of 2022, industry is declining rather than growing.<sup>50</sup>

In 2022, due to the freezing of national foreign exchange reserves and the lack of foreign currency, the government and National Bank of Belarus decided to pay off debts on international loans and Eurobonds in Belarusian rubles. This led to delays in payments to international financial institutions and payments on Eurobonds, causing a de facto default on Belarusian's external obligations.<sup>51</sup> Considering the above, along with internal financial difficulties and the inflation spiral, Belarus is facing a threat of serious economic crisis or, at least, a severe, long-term recession. According to expert estimates, the overall economic downturn may reach up to 20% of its GDP.<sup>52</sup>

### BELARUSIAN SOCIETY: MILITARIZATION, PRO-RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA, AND INTERNATIONAL ISOLATION

With the outbreak of war, Belarusian authorities intensified anti-Western propaganda and the promotion of pro-Russian narratives. Since the end of 2020, the narratives of the Belarusian state media have been synchronized with Russian propaganda, but during the war, propaganda shifted its focus from domestic criticism of the democratic opposition to attacking Ukraine and the West.<sup>53</sup> The West in particular has taken a firm place as the main target of the government's hatred. It is portrayed as the principal agent of division and destruction in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine by funding "color revolutions," and experiencing an economic crisis and moral decline. Anti-Ukrainian narratives focus on the dehumanization of Ukraine, presenting it as a Nazi and Russophobic state to justify Russian aggression, and accusing it of preparing militants to take over Belarus.

Anti-Westernism is accompanied by attacks and widespread persecution for the dissemination of Belarusian national narratives. The use of national his-

torical symbols (the white-red-white flag, the "Pahonia" coat of arms) are interpreted by the state as Nazi and hostile, and therefore subjected to persecution. Publishing any pro-European oriented books and editorials, or those written in Belarusian, especially those condemning Soviet repression or totalitarianism as a phenomenon, is declared "extremist" and withdrawn from public use and bookstores. The same applies even to fiction books by Belarusian<sup>54</sup> or foreign authors.<sup>55</sup> The educational system was also redirected towards militarization and even greater ideologization of educational content. "Improper writers" are excluded from the school literature curriculum, including the works of Nobel laureate Svetlana Aleksievich,<sup>56</sup> while pro-Russian and pro-Soviet interpretations are massively incorporated into the history curriculum. The depths of cleansing everything from any trace of Western or Belarusian influence even reached the alphabet in December 2022, when the authorities banned further use of the Belarusian Latin alphabet (Lacinka) in street and topographical names. The justification for this decision stated that the Latin alphabet contributes to "the imposition of Western liberal values and cultural traditions through the Latinization of the Belarusian language".<sup>57</sup>

Anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda influences the public mood in Belarus. According to the Belarusian Analytical Workroom polls, the vast majority of Belarus's population has a negative attitude toward introducing Belarusian troops into Ukrainian territory. Early in the war, in September 2022, 80.9% were against such a decision, and only 9.5% were in favor.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, the number of Belarusians opposed to using Belarusian infrastructure and territory for Russia's aggression against Ukraine decreased from 61.8% in March 2022 to 51.4% in September 2022, which can be attributed to the effect of propaganda as well as a general decrease in the Belarusian population's attention to the war in general. Meanwhile, there is no rapid upsurge of pro-Russian sentiments; in November 2022,

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about 38% of Belarusians were in favor of an alliance with Russia, and 18% were in favor of integration with the EU, which is not very different from the situation at the beginning of the military aggression (37% and 16%, respectively).<sup>59</sup>

Because of the war, both society and the government in Belarus have found themselves internationally isolated. Rail and air links with the EU have been cut, Belarusians have a harder time obtaining Schengen visas, and access to European education, professional contacts, and the EU labor market have come to a standstill. Previously, Belarusian citizens led Eastern Partnership

countries in obtaining Schengen visas, but now any entry documents have become more difficult to obtain. Unlike Russians, Belarusians have not fallen under a complete visa ban or a ban on cooperation, but their ties to European society have been severely limited.

Belarusian involvement in the war has led to a colossal step backwards in the process of Westernizing Belarus's society and government. Moreover, in the short run, deepened dependence on Russia and the emergence of a "new Iron Curtain" has shed light on the significant existential risk posed to independent Belarusian statehood.

# ESTONIA:

## Politicians' Fight for Party Support Highlights Complex Relationship with the Russian Population

### Kristel Vits

2022 was undoubtedly difficult for many countries. In Estonia, the year started with a focus on the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions, as well as a population frustrated with rising energy costs. The escalation of Russia's aggression to a full-scale war in Ukraine on February 24th – which, coincidentally, happens to be Estonia's Independence Day, as on this day in 1918, Estonia first proclaimed its independence from Russia – was a distraction from some of these issues as both the Estonian government and

society at large quickly mobilized in support of Ukraine and Ukrainians. However, the war's collateral effects quickly led to new challenges: the influx of Ukrainian refugees raised concerns over Estonia's capacity and capability (the registered number of Ukrainian immigrants for 2022 is 31,594),<sup>60</sup> and Russian sanctions exacerbated both the energy crisis as well as general economic situation due to limitations on business. Estonia's inflation rates were highest in the EU for most of the year,<sup>61</sup> and the drop in real wages (wages adjusted to inflation) added to the general welfare crisis. The domestic political situation added yet another lay-



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er of complexity: the souring of relations between the governing liberal Reform Party and left-leaning Centre Party led to a change of government in the middle of the year. The new coalition of Reform Party, the right-wing Christian Democratic Pro Patria, and Social Democrats that came into power in July is more of a marriage of convenience, aimed at holding on until the next general election in March 2023, than a coalition of likeminded parties.<sup>62</sup> The combination of multiple crises and heightened security risks, the tendency of political parties to seek easy rating-boosting policies closer to the elections, and Estonia's unwavering support of Ukraine and Ukrainians has, once more, drawn our own complicated past and relations with Estonia's large Russian minority population into focus, as several policy proposals and new laws highlight the lingering distrust in the Russian-speaking community, or aim to "resolve" the long-standing integration issues once and for all.

## ESTONIA'S ETHNIC RUSSIAN POPULATION – KEY FEATURES

Of the approximately 1.3 million people living in Estonia, roughly 315,242, or 23.7%, are ethnically Russian. As of the end of November 2022, about 72,000 of these permanent residents held Russian citizenship. Additionally, about 70,000 people, mostly Russians, do not hold any citizenship – they are the so-called grey passport holders, named so after to the color of the Estonian alien's passport that they can use for identification and as a travel document. Various parallel structures, such as Russian language school and information networks, the right to travel to Russia (and after 2004, within the EU) visa-free, and barriers to learning or practicing the Estonian language, have kept the numbers of so-called grey passport holders rather high, although since 2016, all children born in Estonia now automatically receive Estonian citizenship. Of the Russian citizens living in Estonia, many have also held onto their Russian passports also because of the inconvenience of taking the Estonian citizenship

exam, for ease of travel to Russia, or because Estonia does not allow dual citizenship.

Ethnic Russians living in Estonia do not form a coherent group – they differ not only in their legal status, as well as their levels of integration in terms of language and culture. To a degree, these differences are generational, as Russian-language schools have been required to offer 60% of their instruction in Estonian since 2011. Still, studies have revealed that ethnicity-based residential segregation has increased in recent years, including in the capital city, Tallinn, where about half of Estonia's Russian-speakers live. Residential segregation points to persistent socio-economic divides between Estonians and ethnic Russians, as the latter have remained relatively immobile over time, while Estonians tend to move towards higher cost of living areas.<sup>63</sup> Another region with higher concentration of Russian-speakers is the Ida-Viru County bordering Russia. For example, the population of Narva, the Estonian-Russian border town which is the largest in the region (and third-largest in Estonia), is over 80% ethnic Russian. In 2014, international media flocked to Narva with the question "Is Narva next [after Crimea]?", alluding to the locals' alienation from the Estonian state and the possibility of Putin invoking Russia's right to defend ethnic Russian compatriots to justify an attack.<sup>64</sup> The world stage once again turned its eyes to Narva during the first few months of the current war, noting the locals' still-complicated feelings towards Russia and Putin, but also towards the Estonian state,<sup>65</sup> as while some are staunchly pro-West and pro-Ukraine, many remain ambivalent and try to distance themselves, and others still retain a pro-Russian/pro-Putin stance.

## NEW LEGISLATION IN 2022 – TACKLING SECURITY, HISTORY, AND INTEGRATION

The overview of some of the laws adopted or considered in 2022 with a direct influence on the Russians living in Estonia should start with the banning of four TV channels from Russia and one from Belarus on the grounds of disseminating Russian



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propaganda, just days after the start of the war, with more channels and websites banned later on.<sup>66</sup> The ban addressed the long-standing issue of Russian-speakers living mostly in the Russian information sphere, preferring Russian sources to Estonian-based alternatives. While following Russian media might be more a matter of cultural belonging and tradition than of trust and belief, as a study from 2015 revealed,<sup>67</sup> the Estonian government found that during times of aggression, they needed to draw a clear line. The ban has worked somewhat, leading to a rise in viewership of the Estonian Public Broadcasting's Russian-language channel ETV+, which was created in 2015 expressly for the purpose of bringing Russian-speakers into the Estonian information sphere, while the Kremlin-controlled TV channels are losing their importance and reliability as main sources of information.<sup>68</sup> But the surveys also reveal that many Russian-speakers turn more to social media, friends, and relatives for reliable information, showcasing a general mistrust in state-based media, and critics point out that there are many ways around online bans.

In December 2022, Parliament approved a law on the long-debated issue of transitioning to fully Estonian-language teaching in schools and kindergartens, starting from the kindergarten and grades one through four in the 2024/2025 school year, and ending the transition with grade 12 no later than in 2032/2033. Exemptions to these rules need to be granted by the government.<sup>69</sup> As noted above, Russian-language schools have had to teach in Estonian at least partially since 2011, but that reform has had some questionable effects of form over function, leading to a "lost generation" of youth struggling to understand Estonian-taught specialty subjects in depth, harming their opportunities to move into higher education.<sup>70</sup> The previous reform was also unable to end the decades-long existence of a parallel Russian-language school system, thus simply reproducing segregation. Critics of the new reform have pointed to lack of suitable teaching materials as well as teaching staff – the entire Estonian school

system is struggling with a teacher shortage – but the government has promised to double the salaries of teachers heading to Ida-Virumaa. Surprisingly, the reform has so far generated little response from the wider Russian community, possibly because the implementation is still some time away and its ramifications remain unclear.

The reaction was markedly different when it came to removing Soviet-era monuments and memorials from public spaces, which arose in late spring since the very symbols that for ethnic Russians signify Soviet victory in WWII and remembering "the good old Soviet times" are seen by ethnic Estonians as symbols of annexation and oppression. Initial discussions focused more abstractly on the questions of removal versus transformation into educational sites, but in August, the government signalled its intention to remove all Soviet-era monuments from public spaces. The announcement was met with hostility in Narva, where locals' attention turned to preserving the Narva tank, a Soviet-era T-34 tank sitting on the town border for decades, signifying the entry point of Soviet troops during World War II, and a popular place to visit during weddings and on Victory Day, which is celebrated on May 9th. Some controversy rose over who should remove the tank, as the law at the time assigned responsibility to the local government, which hesitated to act out of sensitivity for locals' feelings on the matter. In the end, the national government stepped in and relocated the tank on August 16 from Narva to the National War Museum in Viimsi. Prior to the removal of the tank, about one hundred locals gathered at the site in protest, and following the removal, some minor disturbances were reported in and around Narva.<sup>71</sup> For some time after, locals brought flowers and candles to the location where the tank had been. The removal or demolition of Soviet era monuments continued across Estonia, but without further public upheavals. However, it was the introduction of a legislative amendment to the Building Code and Planning Act on the removal of Soviet-era insignia from public spaces in November that drew sharp criticism

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from creative associations in Estonia for being too vague as to what exactly should be removed, what issue is addressed, and how, for example, a single five-point star on a building somewhere presents a security risk. Furthermore, the amendment was criticized for its one-size-fits-all approach, which makes difficult to consider the context of each site.<sup>72</sup>

**In March, the Estonian Association of Gun Owners proposed immediate suspension of Russian citizens' gun licences. In July, this idea resurfaced in the new coalition agreement, which included the aim to repeal weapons permits for Russian and Belarusian citizens, and a corresponding decision was approved by the government at the beginning of November, although approval of the bill in Parliament has stalled. The decision would impact about 1,300 individuals with Russian or Belarusian citizenship, as well as grey passport holders, who own about 3,080 weapons altogether.**

People were also encouraged to hand in their firearms voluntarily, something that some Russian citizens have already done in 2022.<sup>73</sup> It should be noted that there has been no rise in crimes associated with Russian speakers that would make the need for such ban immediate, at least according to public information.

Another debate – yet to be adopted as a law – pertains to repealing Russian citizens' right to vote in local elections. Once again, security concerns are cited as a reason: people not loyal to the Estonian state might gain power in some municipalities. The right of all long-term and permanent residents to vote in local elections is currently written into the Estonian Constitution and the Municipal Council Election Act. The initial draft bill, introduced by then-opposition party Pro Patria in April, foresees repealing voting rights from everyone who is not an Estonian or EU citizen. One might argue that this approach is more equal in terms of not targeting Russian citizens per se, although the intent behind it is clear. While right-wing populist party EKRE was supportive of the proposal – having made a similar one in 2017 – other parties argued for caution, pointing to peoples' long-established expectations, to the matter of unconstitutionality, and to the possibility of inciting disloyalty among non-citizens. Another concern is that in some municipalities, non-citizens make up a significant proportion of the population: by limiting their right to vote, the decision-making would fall on a minority.<sup>74</sup> Despite Pro Patria's push, the proposal was left out of the new coalition agreement, though the bill did pass first reading in Parliament in late September. In an unexpected move, the Reform Party voiced their plan to introduce a more targeted bill in November: temporarily disenfranchising Russian and Belarusian citizens residing in Estonia specifically, on grounds of being citizens of aggressor states.<sup>75</sup> Pro Patria is essentially in support of the measure (although it wants to merge it with theirs), while EKRE maintains support of the Pro Patria's version of revoking voting rights from all third state nationals and

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grey passport holders. Somewhat surprisingly, the non-parliamentary liberal party Eesti 200 has voiced their support of Reform Party's bill, while the opposition Centre Party and coalition Social Democratic Party remain opposed to and critical of both plans.<sup>76</sup> The proposals are populist, undermining trust in Estonian institutions to prevent candidates hostile to the state from running. They also infer that the public is not capable of making the decision not to vote for those candidates themselves. The Reform Party's proposal specifically is somewhat low stakes as well: with the next local elections taking place in 2025, optimists might hope that by then, the law will no longer be necessary.

#### PARTY SUPPORT AND TRUST AMONG RUSSIAN SPEAKERS

As described above, the Russian-speaking community's reaction to these laws mostly comes off as muted and conciliatory, with the exception to their response to the Narva tank. But how do they feel about political parties and government institutions that seem to be taking aim at ethnic Russians, their culture, and history in the name of security? After all, there is still a significant number of Russian speakers who have the right to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections and whose favor the parties might try to curry. However, it should be noted that party support ratings have been quite volatile throughout the year, with parties often changing positions amongst themselves, and the percentage of undecided voters growing for most of 2022, before reaching about 40% towards the end of the year.<sup>77</sup>

For decades, it has been a hard and fast rule in Estonian politics has been that most Russian speakers support the Centre Party. While the party still comes first in party ratings among non-ethnic Estonians, some disappointment or confusion could be observed, as the party's attempts to appeal to both ethnic Estonian and Russian voters have fallen short for both, to the degree that of the larger parties, the Centre Party has lost the most support among

both voter groups since the start of the war. Among non-ethnic Estonians, support ratings have been as high as 60%, and as low as 44% throughout the year. Somewhat surprisingly, the nationalist EKRE is making moves into Centre Party's territory: in 2022, this party gained most new supporters among Russian speakers and has become their second preference, according to party ratings.<sup>78</sup> The EKRE's conservative and traditional values are a common denominator, with ethnic Russian voters leaning more conservative than ethnic Estonian voters. Moreover, EKRE's vice-leader Mart Helme has made some ambiguous anti-war statements that come off as supportive of Russia and has also voiced his opposition to Ukrainian immigration. Both could form points of convergence for EKRE and Estonia's ethnic Russian voters: one speaks to the Russian speaking community's displeasure at being cast as the universal and uniform villain, the other to their fear of being replaced on the job market by incoming Ukrainians. Finally, as EKRE has been in opposition throughout the year, they might not carry equal responsibility for government bills among the electorate. But with their ethno-nationalist bent, it is difficult for EKRE to maintain steady support among non-ethnic Estonians, fluctuating between their lowest point of 9.6% at the start of the year to a high of almost 25% in November, followed by a drop to 12% by the end of December. While the Reform Party has occasionally gained more popularity among non-ethnic Estonians than EKRE, for most of 2022, it and other parties have remained firmly below the Centre Party's and EKRE's support ratings among surveyed non-ethnic Estonians. Based on data on non-ethnic Estonians' trust in government institutions, it should be noted that in December 2022, 71% of non-ethnic Estonian respondents reported full trust in their local government, whereas trust in Parliament and the government was at 37% and 35% respectively.<sup>79</sup> Trust in local government is continuously higher than trust in state-level institutions, which is important to point out in light of the discussions around disenfranchisement and the possible ramifications

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that these decisions might have on ethnic Russian communities' willingness to engage with the government.

Estonian political parties seem to be taking somewhat of a gamble at the expense of the country's Russian-speaking population: while some of the policies adopted or proposed in 2022 are needed, such as curbing the spread of Russian propaganda and misinformation or educational reforms, others point to populism and short-term calculations taking greater hold in attempts to one-up each other in ratings and in the upcoming elections. Politicians seem to hope that the effects of these proposals are too small-scale (such as revoking gun permits from 1,300 people) or far enough in time (next local elections will take place in 2025, and the school reform will not go into effect until the 2024/2025 school year) to have wider negative effects such as political unrest, and that Russian-speakers who already hold Estonian citizenship do not care if their non-citizen co-nationals are stripped of their voting rights. The fact that the only issue that has sparked more widespread outlash and criticism among the ethnic

Russian community so far pertains to the removal of Soviet era monuments seems to favor this line of thinking. Nevertheless, Estonian parties are moving in a somewhat dangerous direction, where what seems like compliance might hide feelings of alienation and apathy among Estonia's largest minority group, running counter to long-term goals of integration and inclusion. While the number of ethnic Russians applying for Estonian citizenship was larger than average in 2022, this also does not necessarily prove that these policies are successful in convincing more people of the merits of Estonian citizenship or that more people are rejecting Russia's ideology – it might just be a pragmatic step in a situation where a Russian passport no longer serves their best interests. Whichever parties form the new governing coalition after the March elections will still have an opportunity to showcase their commitment to “not leave the ethnic Russian community behind” by engaging with them, explaining their intentions, listening to their concerns and ensuring proper funding and preparations for educational reform, as long as they temper populist sentiments.

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# GEORGIA:

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## EU Candidate Status vs. European Perspective – Failure Sold as an Achievement

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### Levan Kakhishvili

Membership in the European Union (EU) is one way for former Communist countries to escape Russian influence. The cases of Central and Eastern European countries have demonstrated the effectiveness of this path, which, among others, is one reason why former Soviet countries such as Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine keep striving to join the EU. However, for these three countries, EU membership has often seemed to be a moving target. Together, the three countries are frequently referred to as the Associated Trio, due to the fact that out of the six

Eastern Partnership countries, only these three were willing to meet the conditions to sign an Association Agreement with the EU. Georgia, in its own turn, has repeatedly found itself in a peculiar situation, in which Westerners have doubted its very “Europeanness”, which would make it ineligible for the EU membership – one case in point here is Morocco’s application to the EU, which was rejected on the grounds of eligibility. Consequently, decision-makers in Georgia have been rather careful about officially submitting a membership application. However, during the electoral campaign for the 2020 parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream (GD), the ruling



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party which still holds majority in Parliament, promised that if they won, they would prepare a formal application for EU membership and apply by 2024. Although this led to doubts and questions among political commentators who described the move as “ambitious,”<sup>80</sup> in fact, the process was accelerated following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. After the invasion, the Ukrainian government decided to formally apply for the EU membership, and Moldova quickly followed suit. The GD government in Georgia initially hesitated,<sup>81</sup> but eventually, Tbilisi joined Kyiv and Chisinau and the Associated Trio submitted their applications together.

## THE EU’S DECISION AND REACTIONS IN GEORGIA

The Associated Trio was exceptionally quick to fill out the questionnaire sent by the EU Commission, and the accelerated process from the EU’s side meant that the Commission issued its recommendations as early as June 2022. Some advocated for not breaking up the Associated Trio and sending a clear signal not only to the three countries but also to Russia. For example, Urmas Paet, a Vice-Chair of the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and shadow rapporteur on the implementation of the EU Association Agreement with Georgia, wrote in early June, “it is crucial to grant Ukraine EU candidate status. Same goes for Moldova and Georgia. It would give these countries a clear perspective. Only after granting candidate status will it be possible to start real accession negotiations.”<sup>82</sup> However, only Georgia was not granted candidate status; instead, the Georgian government was issued conditions that it has to meet in order to obtain candidate status.<sup>83</sup> The decision was made, however, that Georgia is a European country and can eventually become a member – a so-called “European perspective”.

Granting that European perspective to Georgia was an important milestone in EU-Georgia relations. However, the decision also showed that Georgia’s democratic achievements were insufficient for

EU candidate status, unlike those in Ukraine and Moldova. Yet, GD politicians deemed the move “a well-deserved achievement” and “a recognition of 10 years of hard work by our [GD] government.”<sup>84</sup> Consequently, the GD largely ignored its own failure to secure the EU candidacy and tried to sell the European perspective – a technical eligibility for EU membership – as an accomplishment. Responding to the conditions outlined by the Commission for Georgia to meet to be granted the candidacy, the Prime Minister Garibashvili stated: “The first condition and priority, which is in the interests of our people, is that there is peace in our country.”<sup>85</sup> This sort of rhetoric aims at underlining the fact that there is a war in Ukraine and not in Georgia, which should be a sufficient reason for the Georgian public to be more satisfied even if the EU deemed Georgian democracy inferior to that of Ukraine and Moldova.

## CONDITIONS GEORGIA NEEDS TO MEET TO OBTAIN CANDIDATE STATUS

Georgia received 12 conditions from the EU Commission, which Tbilisi has to address in order to be granted the candidate status in the future.<sup>86</sup> These conditions can be grouped into five broader categories. First, the EU Commission expects Georgian political parties to decrease polarization and ensure that they interact more cooperatively among themselves. Second, Georgia needs to strengthen its democratic institutions such as its electoral framework, anti-corruption agency, law enforcement agencies, and public defender’s office. Third, Tbilisi needs to implement a judicial reform to ensure the independence of the courts. Fourth, the Commission recommends implementing the commitment to “de-oligarchization.” Finally, Georgia should ensure media independence, improve the protection of human rights, and ensure civil society organizations’ participation in the decision-making processes.

If this list of conditions were compared to that issued for Moldova, analysis will show that they are

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largely similar, with a few exceptions. Georgia received a recommendation to strengthen media independence and decrease polarization, while Moldova received a recommendation to implement public administration reform and complete the reform of its public financial management.<sup>87</sup> However, the recommendations for Georgia refer to the fundamental nature of democratic governance – improving political competition and ensuring freedom of expression and a level playing field. Additionally, Georgia’s GD government did not show much enthusiasm for applying for the EU membership. The Chairman of the GD, Irakli Kobakhidze, stated that application for the EU membership would be “hasty” and “counterproductive.”<sup>88</sup> The GD’s 2020 electoral campaign, in fact, promised voters that by 2024 Georgia, under the GD leadership, would apply for the EU membership. Therefore, labeling the application as “hasty” was a reference to this point. However, following public pressure, the GD changed its position and decided to join Ukraine and Moldova.

The Georgian public, or at least the vocal part of it, e.g., civil society organizations, is well aware of the importance of the EU for Georgia. For example, according to an opinion poll conducted in July-August of 2022, three out of four Georgians approve “of the Georgian government’s stated goal to join the EU,” while only 14 percent disapproves.<sup>89</sup> According to the same poll, 55 percent of respondents believe that in the last five years, Georgia has maintained the same relationship with the EU or has grown closer to it; only 30 percent believe that Georgia has distanced itself from the EU.<sup>90</sup> In light of such public attitudes, the GD government’s attempt to portray to the outlook for becoming a member of the EU as a great achievement might be a smart way of communicating with the masses.

#### GEORGIA'S RESPONSE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS: IS CANDIDACY REACHABLE?

The EU Commission recommendations represent clear homework for the Georgian government. Four specific issues are highly important for Georgia to ad-

dress in a comprehensive manner: effective polarization in the political system, informal influences and de-oligarchization, judicial reform, and media independence. In all these areas, there has been little progress since the EU Commission issued its recommendations.

**No real steps have been taken to decrease polarization. Instead, the issue of the former president Mikhail Saakashvili’s health following his arrest has become increasingly controversial. This has further increased the emotional response to the issue among the supporters of the Georgian Dream and United National Movement – Saakashvili’s party. Meanwhile, there have been calls from the representatives of the EU and US to ensure that Saakashvili is treated adequately. Some have suggested that his prison sentence should be suspended while he receives treatment outside Georgia.<sup>91</sup>**

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To address the issue of de-oligarchization, Georgia adopted a new law in late 2022. The bill is inspired by a similar law adopted by the Ukrainian authorities and sets the same definition of an oligarch. However, GD representatives have absolutely no doubt that Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of their party and a former Prime Minister who continues to have informal influence on Georgian politics,<sup>92</sup> is not an oligarch, according to the set definition. In fact, the GD believes that the new law means that two opposition figures – David Kezerashvili, the owner of the television channel Formula TV, and Mikheil Saakashvili, the third president of Georgia – are oligarchs and need limits on their public engagements.<sup>93</sup> Consequently, this divide further contributes to polarization and unhealthy media environment.

The GD has initiated amendments to the Law on Common Courts to ensure that Georgia meets the conditions set out by the EU Commission. However, these changes were met with a lot of criticism. A Georgian watchdog, the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) stated that "the draft law does not comply with the recommendations of the European Commission, other international partners, or civil society."<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, in October 2022, two highly controversial judges, Levan Murusidze and Dimitri Gvritishvili, were elected as judge members of the High Council of Justice (HCoJ). HCoJ is meant to be the guarantor of Georgian courts' independence, which is why the return of Murusidze and Gvritishvili to HCoJ was heavily criticized. The Coalition for Independent and Transparent Justice, which unites more than 40 local civil society organizations, stated that their return "strengthens clan rule in the Court and hinders the fundamental reform of the

justice system."<sup>95</sup> Consequently, it seems that Georgia still has a ways to go before achieving judicial independence.

Finally, a similar story emerges when it comes to an independent media. One symbolic case illustrating the state of media freedom in Georgia is often believed to be the "politically motivated" case against Nika Gvaramia, the chief of the main opposition TV channel, Mtavari.<sup>96</sup> According to the GYLA's assessment, the court verdict against Gvaramia is "unfounded."<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, local watchdogs report that in 2022, "harassment and pressure" on critical media became "even more systematic," for example, through so-called defamation lawsuits by government officials or persons related to them.<sup>98</sup> As a result, press freedom has moved backwards while "the state, by initiating new legal regulations, poses the risk of unjustified restriction of freedom of expression and the danger of worsening the media environment in the country."<sup>99</sup>

Overall, these steps taken by the GD government and the on-the-ground situation as reported by the local watchdogs suggest that Georgia still has a lot of work to do to meet the conditions set out by the EU Commission. Therefore, a country that once a frontrunner of the Eastern Partnership initiative now trails Moldova and Ukraine. Georgia was unable to seize the moment and fully utilize the EU's readiness to offer a fast track to the Associated Trio on their way to EU candidacy, which in turn is a result of the major shifts in geopolitical thinking in the EU following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The ball is in Georgia's court now, as the window of opportunity might slam shut following the Associated Trio's split.



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# KAZAKHSTAN:

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## Astana Searches for Ways to Make up its Geostrategic Balance

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**Zhar Zardykhan**

On June 17, 2022, amid growing public discontent around Kazakhstan's active involvement in Russia-led initiatives,<sup>100</sup> Kazakh president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev traveled to attend the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), the annual event held under the auspices of Rus-

sian president Vladimir Putin. Predictably in the face of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, no leader of the so-called Western world took part in the forum, which has been held since 1997, with Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi participating via video conference and Chinese president Xi Jinping delivering a video greeting. Thus, either willingly or unwillingly, the Kazakh



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president became the sole leader in the spotlight at an event that has traditionally served as a platform for Russian geostrategic propaganda, as other high-profile “foreign” participants were represented by the Taliban and unrecognized separatist formations such as the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DPR) and “Luhansk People’s Republic” (LPR).

### TOKAYEV’S CLEAR POSITION

There were high expectations for Tokayev’s participation in the plenary session alongside Putin, which was moderated by Margarita Simonyan,<sup>101</sup> the head of Russia’s state-owned media conglomerate RT (formerly Russia Today) and one of the most prominent instigators of the war in Ukraine, who is under sanctions by the European Union (EU), Canada, and the United Kingdom, among others. This choice raised eyebrows in Kazakhstan, since just months earlier, her husband Tigran Keosayan, another prominent figure of the Kremlin’s propaganda, released a video in response to Kazakhstan’s “canceled” Victory Day parade. In the video, Keosayan threatened a Ukraine-like scenario and literally referred to the Kazakh people as “ungrateful,” and “sly,” for which he was eventually banned from entering Kazakhstan.<sup>102</sup>

In response to Simonyan’s question regarding Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine, and whether it was “inevitable” and “legitimate,” the Kazakh President, who appeared slightly irritated by Putin mispronouncing his name,<sup>103</sup> responded smoothly that Kazakhstan would most likely not recognize the quasi-governmental territories like Luhansk and Donetsk.<sup>104</sup> He also expressed his complaints over the incessant statements by Russian politicians, journalists, and artists attacking Kazakhstan. However, the official report on the Kazakh President’s official website did not include his comments over the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia,<sup>105</sup> or his complaints about statements made by Russian politicians.

Despite the fact that Tokayev’s statement on the territorial integrity of Ukraine was broadly regarded in Russia, Ukraine, and elsewhere as a public humiliation<sup>106</sup> or even a direct insult to Putin,<sup>107</sup> his stance was strictly in line with Kazakhstan’s existing approach towards the annexed territories. As of March 2022, Timur Suleimenov, the Kazakh President’s First Deputy Chief of Staff, openly stated that Kazakhstan did not and would not recognize the annexation of Crimea or the Donbass.<sup>108</sup> Tokayev himself soon reiterated the sentiment in an English-language article in *The National Interest*, as he repeated that Kazakhstan respects Ukrainian territorial integrity.<sup>109</sup> This seemed to rectify rather dubious statements made during a 2019 interview for *Deutch Welle*<sup>110</sup> regarding the violent annexation of Crimea, in which he claimed that “annexation” was too strong of a word to describe the situation.

Nevertheless, a huge wave of aggressive attacks on Kazakhstan was unleashed by high-ranking Russian officials and media personalities when Tokayev expressed the Kazakh government’s well-known position at SPIEF. Former President of the Russian Federation and current Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev crossed a line when he described Kazakhstan as an artificial state and former Russian territory on social media,<sup>111</sup> going so far as to accuse the country of committing genocide against its ethnic Russian population. In the post, which Medvedev later claimed had been manipulated by a hacker,<sup>112</sup> he claimed that there would be no order in Kazakhstan unless the Russians came. Konstantin Zatulin, the deputy chairman of the State Duma committee on Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) affairs, unambiguously threatened to punish Kazakhstan,<sup>113</sup> which shares the longest land border with Russia, for appearing to support Western sanctions against Russia. Medvedev claimed that Russia has the means to force Kazakhstan to reconsider its displeasure.

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## KAZAKHSTAN'S EFFORTS TO COMPENSATE FOR RUSSIA'S DECLINING ROLE

One of Russia's most common grievances against Tokayev personally was the issue of his "indebtedness"<sup>114</sup> to Putin for sending Russian troops under the mandate of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) during the bloody events in Kazakhstan in January 2022. As the initially peaceful protests throughout the country turned violent,<sup>115</sup> leading to a state of emergency and eventually 244 deaths, Tokayev called up the CSTO troops<sup>116</sup> to help maintain order. This move was broadly criticized across the country as it made Kazakhstan more dependent on Russia and Putin's whims.<sup>117</sup> Eventually, from January 13 on, within a week of their arrival, 2,030 CSTO troops, about two thirds of whom were Russian soldiers, were asked to leave the country within ten days.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, in an interview with the Russian state-owned "Rossiia-24" channel on the eve of SPIEF, Tokayev once again found himself reiterating that Russia had not "saved" Kazakhstan, so that there was no reason to bow down and serve Russia forever, as the "limited contingent" of the joint CSTO troops did not fire a single bullet.<sup>119</sup>

Ongoing pressure, however, might have forced Kazakh leadership's hand at times to pursue foreign policy endeavors aimed at pleasing Russia, such as the Kazakh President's bizarre proposal to create an international organization to support and promote the Russian language,<sup>120</sup> or Kazakhstan's vote against the UN General Assembly resolution on human rights in occupied Crimea and Sevastopol.<sup>121</sup> The vote against the UN resolution caused such a public outrage, that a deputy from the ruling party had to pledge in advance that in the future, Kazakhstan would be neutral, and claimed that the country had no choice in the matter, comparing it someone living in a house where one neighbor is a drunkard, and another is a drug addict.<sup>122</sup>

**Indeed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine caught Kazakh foreign policy off guard. Previously, Kazakhstan had relied on close relations with Russia, especially in political matters, and growing economic partnership with China while also building ties with United States, EU, and Turkey. As the Russo-Ukrainian war lingered, it became much harder to maintain the existing geopolitical balance between Russia and the West, since "pleasing both Russia and the West is now impossible,"<sup>123</sup> driving Kazakhstan to seek alternative transport routes bypassing Russia, such as the Trans-Caspian route.**

Despite the fact that the frequency of Tokayev's meetings with Putin might create the impression that they are improving, Kazakhstan appears to be intensifying its economic and logistics ties with part-

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ners outside the region, primarily to compensate the declining role of Russia. Thus, in November 2022, Kazakhstan signed a memorandum of understanding on strategic partnership with the EU on alternative energy resources.<sup>124</sup> Around the same time, both the president of the European Council Charles Michel and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrel visited Kazakhstan, followed by president Tokayev's trip to France to facilitate, among other things, new economic models to reflect the reshaping of the global energy market.<sup>125</sup> In 2023, Kazakhstan is expected to send 1.5 million tons of crude oil to Germany via a Russian pipeline, which could potentially be expanded to 7 million tons.<sup>126</sup>

Geopolitics and international diplomacy aside, the people of Kazakhstan have led the transformation through their solidarity with the Ukrainian people since the beginning of the war. Several rallies in support of Ukraine against Russian aggression are a testament to this.<sup>127</sup> At the same time, individuals and the business community of Kazakhstan have continuously collected and transported humanitarian aid to Ukraine since the first days of war, including the long-awaited generators for Ukrainian hospitals,<sup>128</sup> while the privately funded Kazakh "Yurts of Invincibility"<sup>129</sup> erected in Bucha, Kyiv, and Kharkiv, causing diplomatic tensions with Russia.

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# KYRGYZSTAN:

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## Russia's War in Ukraine Opened the Gates to Change in Kyrgyz Labor Migration

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**Emilbek Dzhuraev**

THE WAY IT'S BEEN

For Kyrgyzstan, the issue of migrant citizens has been a cornerstone concern for many years, affecting its economic, security, cultural, and foreign policy dynamics, to name a few. Its continuous and long-term salience notwithstanding, the topic of migration – and the multiple dynamics and nuances within it – gained particular importance and interest in Kyrgyzstan in 2022, mostly in the wake of Russia's war in Ukraine, launched on February 24. The still-unfolding changes in this arena can define or strongly impact many areas of Kyrgyzstan's economic, political, and cultural life for years to come.

An estimated 1.1 million out of Kyrgyzstan's 7 million citizens live and work abroad as migrants, of whom one million are working in Russia.<sup>130</sup> Labor migration took off as a significant factor starting in the 2000s, when Russia, and to a much smaller extent Kazakhstan, saw booming economies driven by skyrocketing oil prices and thus need for labor. In 2021, remittances sent to Kyrgyzstan made up an estimated 32.69% of the country's GDP, a figure that has been quite representative of data for at least the last decade.<sup>131</sup> Kyrgyzstan – along with neighboring Tajikistan – regularly appears among the top remittance-dependent economies in the world.



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The long-term migration of nearly 15% of the population abroad – mostly working-aged men and women, naturally – has inevitably affected many areas of social and economic life at home: demographics, families, culture, civil and human rights, and crime, to name a few. Migrant citizens both affected – and were affected, in turn, by – Kyrgyz politics, introducing a strongly pro-Russian voice into public life, on the one hand, and effectively ending their electoral participation, on the other. Less than 10,000 votes were cast abroad in the most recent parliamentary elections held in November 2021, meaning that just over 11% of the 85,000 Kyrgyz citizens registered to vote abroad (already a minus-cule number) took part in the vote at all.<sup>132</sup>

Yet, despite such low absentee voter turnout, migrant citizens were a major factor in policy decisions by the Kyrgyz government, especially in shaping Kyrgyz-Russian relations: Kyrgyzstan's accession into the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union, the Kyrgyz government's constantly pleading for better treatment of its citizens living in Russia, or in defining Kyrgyzstan's position regarding the war in Ukraine.

## KYRGYZ MIGRANTS AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

As soon as Vladimir Putin launched a war in Ukraine, there were concerns over Kyrgyz labor migrants in Russia. Predictably, there were fears of negative repercussions following Kyrgyzstan's announcement of a position that was rather untoward for the Kremlin. Everywhere, from social media buzz to informal reasoning by government personnel, one could hear arguments along the lines of "before declaring support for Ukraine and denouncing the Kremlin's aggression, think of what that might do to our migrant compatriots in Russia". The migrants, of course, were not the only argument that held Kyrgyzstan back from voicing a more decisive position, or even the heaviest, but it was possibly the most easily and broadly understood escapist argument shaping public opinion.

Another early concern was the migrants' employment and earnings against the backdrop of quickly-mounting

sanctions against Russia, the pullout of foreign companies, and the free-fall of the ruble's exchange rate against the dollar and other foreign currencies. If these fears materialized for the Kyrgyz in Russia, the negative consequences would include massive job losses, earnings losing value, and a resulting sharp decline of remittances transfers and increased migrant citizens returning home. As of late 2022, such steep negative impacts from the war had not appeared to have materialized and affected the Kyrgyz laborers as feared,<sup>133</sup> and by preliminary estimates, the gross amount of migrant remittances even appeared to have grown in 2022 as compared to the previous year – a result that some analysts explained in part by exchange rate dynamics. Beginning in April, the Russian ruble appreciated against the dollar in both Russia and Kyrgyzstan, contrary to logic.

Third, a question that arose and hovered in the air throughout the year was that of Kyrgyz citizens in Russia being drawn to the war activities among the Russian army. Until the end of 2022, it remained unclear what the numbers might be of Kyrgyz nationals fighting on the side of Russia in Ukraine, while anecdotal evidence suggested that there were such persons, indeed. A half-dozen Kyrgyz were killed in the war, and their remains were brought back to Kyrgyzstan for burial.<sup>134</sup> Several of them were buried, very oddly and drawing much controversy, under a military ceremony featuring the Kyrgyz and Russian flags. In each of these cases, it appeared, that the deceased was a Russian citizen with family and birthplace in Kyrgyzstan. The concern lingered that much greater numbers of Kyrgyz citizens – who are constitutionally not forbidden from also holding Russian citizenship – could be recruited in broader military mobilization campaigns that were expected into early 2023. The Kyrgyz Embassy and consulates in Russia were open to consult the citizens there on the legal aspects of such moves – namely, among other things, that forbids fighting a foreign war on behalf of another country.

## KYRGYZ LABOR MIGRATION'S QUEST FOR NEW DIRECTIONS

Both in anticipation of a massive return of their citizens from Russia and in seeking to diversify

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the destinations for Kyrgyz citizens seeking work abroad, the Kyrgyz government and other stakeholders – and some other countries in the region – engaged several countries to secure temporary work opportunities, which eventually led to several thousand citizens finding short-term work in Great Britain, Germany, and South Korea.<sup>135</sup> Kyrgyz labor migrants also went to a number of other countries in greater numbers than before in search of more attractive opportunities, from Turkey to the Gulf countries, to Japan and Europe.

**The lack of diversity of labor migrant destinations had been a serious risk factor from earlier on, given the number of Kyrgyz citizens in Russia and the economic weight of their remittances, making Kyrgyzstan heavily dependent on a single labor market. The routine and widespread legal challenges, job security, and employer compliance with employment agreements, as well as numerous other challenges faced by Kyrgyz migrants in Russia had complicated this single-market dependency further.**

After Russia, the next major destination for Kyrgyz labor migrants was Kazakhstan, which became attractive at about the same time as Russia and for the same reasons – a booming oil economy in the early 2000s thanks to a steep hike in oil prices. While Kazakhstan remains significant, it has problems similar to those experienced in Russia – especially abusive employers. Those problems were vividly exacerbated in January 2022 for Kyrgyz citizens,<sup>136</sup> when political protests erupted and turned violent. Kazakh leaders blamed, among others, “20,000 bandits” and “foreign terrorists”.<sup>137</sup> At least 5 Kyrgyz citizens were arbitrarily arrested and tortured by Kazakhstan’s police in their attempts to produce evidence of those claims, including a popular jazz musician arrested on his way back to Kyrgyzstan.<sup>138</sup>

Against the backdrop of well-known experiences among Kyrgyz labor migrants in both Russia and Kazakhstan over many years, the new destinations for work – especially the European and developed Asian countries – have the power to introduce the migrants to novel, legal, and secure work experiences, in addition to opportunities to see the general social conditions and life there. Despite their very small numbers, therefore, these new destinations can be catalytic to significant positive demands when it comes to migrant labor, as well as in governance in general.

#### TABLES TURNED: THE RUSSIAN MIGRANT FLOW TO KYRGYZSTAN

An entirely novel phenomenon began as war broke out in Ukraine. Thousands of Russian citizens arrived in Kyrgyzstan in two main waves in 2022 – in March/April and later on, in September.<sup>139</sup> The first wave consisted generally of those who left Russia because they disapproved of the war and held liberal views, whereas the second wave were mostly those who left to avoid being sent to war – the mobilization dodgers – without necessarily opposing the war itself. Certainly, such generalizations need to be taken carefully

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– there was no study to corroborate them, and there could have been other legitimate reasons for Russians to migrate, such as their employers relocating out of Russia. There is no official count of those who arrived from Russia: on the high end, nearly 200,000 Russians are reported to have come, which apparently included all arrivals and did not subtract those who only stayed briefly in Kyrgyzstan before heading to a third destination or back to Russia; and at the lower end, over 30,000 Russian citizens were estimated to have come and remained in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>140</sup>

The sudden and massive arrival of Russians was very much a development of contradictory implications, and generated multiple consequences that had never been previously experienced in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>141</sup> For one, hotels were at full capacity, and rent prices suddenly spiked. There was a shortage of apartments available for rent. The job market became competitive, especially in low-skilled jobs such as café and restaurant workers. Both of these developments benefitted relevant business owners, but had a negative impact on locals, who saw the new arrivals as unfair competition.

A third very notable aspect was how the large numbers of Russians contributed to a backlash over identity, be it in the condescending language used by new arrivals to describe living conditions in Kyrgyzstan and the locals' acrimonious response, the intensified anti-imperialist and decolonial rhetoric among critical Kyrgyz citizens, or the elevation of linguistic tensions, namely, more vocal and widespread calls for switching to Kyrgyz. There were certainly many Russians among the immigrants who were critically aware of Russia's role in the region in recent history and showed understanding and respect toward local sensibilities in matters of language and attitude, however they appeared to be fewer in numbers. Understandably, for most Russians coming to Kyrgyzstan in 2022, the primary if not only concern was Russia's war against Ukraine and their wish to escape it, not anything about Kyrgyzstan per se.

## CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS OF 2022 MIGRATION DYNAMICS

2022 saw major changes and developments for Kyrgyzstan, and those involving labor migration had significant, potentially far-reaching consequences, coming to dominate Kyrgyz political, economic, cultural, and other discourses over the past 20 years. Massive labor migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia faced changes never seen before, including during the Covid-19 pandemic. The war in Ukraine, which the world quickly realized was not going to be over in just a few days, set off growing numbers of unemployment among labor migrants and a devaluation of their earnings, driving many of them to return home. Initially, for various reasons, none of these concerns reached the sudden, dramatic levels feared, but 2023 promised to bring an overall worsening in the quality of life, as anti-Russian sanctions kicked into gear and Putin struggled to keep his costly war in Ukraine going.

Negative trends were expected to continue in 2023 and beyond, with little being done in Kyrgyzstan to prepare for and cope with the consequences. In early 2023, alarm bells rang as Kyrgyz nationals who had acquired Russian citizenship would be recruited to go to war. By January, those who held Russian passports were being prevented from leaving Russia.<sup>142</sup> Whether there were any ways to help Kyrgyz compatriots facing the risk of mobilization remained unanswered.

The Kyrgyz government was slow to create alternative job opportunities both within Kyrgyzstan and abroad, launch training and education opportunities for migrants forced to return with no viable alternatives, prepare and launch legal and rights awareness activities among relevant citizens, and generally develop stronger cooperation frameworks within the region and internationally. The cultural, regulatory, and propaganda aspects of the war and Russian politics, in general, were being felt among Kyrgyz labor migrants, with clear implications for Kyrgyzstan. Many of the dire expectations for Kyrgyz labor migrants in



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Russia from 2022 stand likely to materialize in 2023. As critical and difficult as 2023 may be, based on the labor migration events in 2022, the near future may usher in two positive outcomes for Kyrgyzstan and its citizens. For one, Kyrgyzstan's disproportionately heavy dependence on one country as the destination for its migrant citizens may become more balanced. For another, the resulting changes can encourage positive dynamics in Kyrgyzstan's Westernization record in several ways. First, suddenly, increased numbers of typically low-skilled workers who had never expected to travel to Europe were obtaining work

opportunities in countries like Britain, Germany, and Poland (as well as South Korea and Japan) would be exposed to Western society, raising the level of positive, first-hand knowledge of the West. Secondly, the process of diversifying labor market destinations would trickle down to a more solidly diversified, balanced foreign policy, including a more constructive attitude toward Western countries as partners. Third, a closely-related outcome of such changes would be accelerated de-Sovietization and de-Communization processes in Kyrgyzstan, both areas where the country has been genuinely slow.

# LATVIA:

## The Likely Demise of Pro-Russian Politics

**Ilvija Bruge**

Historically, Latvian society has been very ethnically divided. Some of the division can be attributed to its long history of foreign rule, but mostly to the Soviet Union's massive Russification policy. In 1989, shortly before the Soviet Union's collapse, the percentage of ethnic Latvians in Latvia was only 52% (in comparison with over 80% right after the Second World War).<sup>143</sup> The remainder of society is mainly comprised of ethnic Russians and small communities of Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Poles. By 2022, the proportion of ethnic Latvians had increased to 63%.<sup>144</sup> This is attributed to the fact that the Russian Army and their families returned to Russia in 1990s, the aging of the local Russian-speaking population, along with other factors.<sup>145</sup> Due to the linguistic and cultural split between the two communities and the

failed integration process throughout Latvia's 30 years of independence, Russian and Latvian-speaking communities have continued to live parallel lives. A large fraction of the Russian speakers have long held onto nostalgia for the Soviet times and the privileged position that ethnic Russians enjoyed, while the Latvians see parts of Russian-speaking community as disloyal and a potential threat to Latvian statehood. This division has become increasingly complicated since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

### THE DEMISE OF HARMONY, THE KEY PRO-RUSSIAN POLITICAL PARTY

The most evident stage for this discord is the political arena, and the recent parliamentary elections, held in October, 2022, where the traditionally, the pro-Russian political party, Harmony, failed to pass



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the threshold of 5% of the votes needed to enter Parliament. As a side note – voting rates were not a key issue, as it was even slightly higher (59.4%) than in the previous parliamentary election (56.4%). A combination of political maneuvering and constant voter support, mainly from Russian-speaking Latvian voters, allowed Harmony to be a permanent and influential political force. It won the previous three parliamentary elections in 2011, 2014, and 2018, and did well even prior to that.<sup>146</sup> However, due to its pro-Russian stance and cooperation agreement with Vladimir Putin’s United Russia Party, it was never involved in any coalition governments. The party was against condemning Russia’s invasion in the Donbas in 2014, with all of its members voting against the parliamentary resolution.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, Harmony criticized European sanctions against the Russian Federation and continued to cooperate with United Russia.<sup>148</sup> Despite an official announcement cancelling said cooperation agreement in 2017,<sup>149</sup> the Latvian population largely continued to believe that Harmony retained unofficial ties with the Russian government.

Things changed dramatically for Harmony following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In fact, on February 24, the leader of the Harmony, Jānis Urbanovičs, had already condemned Russia’s actions in a public statement and declared support to the Ukrainian nation.<sup>150</sup> Following the party’s change in stance, it swiftly lost a large part of its support base, falling from the leader position in pre-election polls to fourth place by May. It is worth noting that Harmony and its leadership reiterated their stance at the party’s congress in May: “Russia is committing crimes, and if that results in Harmony’s falling ratings, so be it. We cannot remain silent about Putin’s atrocities in Ukraine.”<sup>151</sup> One would like to believe that this was a true conviction and not an attempt to appeal to Latvian voters. In August 2022, Harmony was rating a mere 6.6% in approval polls.<sup>152</sup> It was still expected to get into Parliament, but scored even lower than anticipated, receiving only 4.81% of the votes (in comparison, it received 19.8% in 2018 and 23% in the 2014 election).

It would be simplistic to say that Harmony’s stance against the war in Ukraine was the only reason for its demise. Its long reign in the capital city of Riga and lack of tangible achievements, as well as accusations of corruption against its former leader, Nils Ušakovs, and his election to the European Parliament, seen by many as an attempt to “flee” and obtain immunity, are also important factors.

**But the fact of the matter is that many of Harmony’s voters did indeed feel betrayed by its criticism towards Russia, especially in its traditional power bases in Riga and the Latgale historic region. As described by sociologist Aigars Freimanis: “To convince a Russian-speaker [in Latvia] to admit that the war is wrong; that it’s an aggressor’s war against an ethnically very close nation – it is like making someone to convert from Orthodoxy to Catholicism. Calling Russia and Russians invaders – although many are aware that there are problems, they are not willing to admit it publicly.”<sup>153</sup>**

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## OTHER PRO-RUSSIAN PLAYERS: THE OLD GUARD AND NEWCOMERS

Another factor that played an important role in Harmony's loss in the election was the development of new pro-Russian political parties – given room by Harmony's own change of stance towards Russia. Their emergence split the voting base that was traditionally monopolized by Harmony. Until now, the only other noteworthy pro-Russian party, although marginal, was the Latvian Russian Union (LKS). Led by Tatjana Ždanoka (the former Communist and opponent of Latvia's independence) since the mid-2000's, it has always been very ethnically incendiary and borderline seditious towards Latvian statehood. LKS has never made it to Parliament, and only saw a faint improvement in this election – from 3.2% in 2018 to 3.63% in 2022.<sup>154</sup> Unlike the Latvian-speaking electorate, since the late 1990s, the Russian-speaking voters had been quite uniform. Harmony had been their go-to party since its establishment, leading the way to victories in the several past elections.

Two more pro-Russian political parties were established prior to the 2022 election. Andrejs Rošļikovs, who was previously expelled from Harmony, established Stability! In 2021, together with his colleague Valērijs Petrovs. Initially, the party was appealing to the anti-Covid restrictions audience, but after the war began in Ukraine, the party changed its emphasis, while still avoiding any direct talk about the war. However, based on its members' online activities, it is evident that they are averse to hoisting any Ukrainian flags and gathering donations for Ukraine. During the first few weeks of the war, the party was calling for neutrality and disapproved of sanctions. Stability! was the only pro-Russian party to make it into Parliament, with a surprise result of 6.8% (at the beginning of the year, its support stood at just above 2%). That result might seem mediocre at best, but the party did well in Riga (9.15%), as well as in its power base in the Latgale historic

region, winning the two key cities of Daugavpils (26.01%), and Rēzekne (22.34%).<sup>155</sup>

Analysts explain the party's success with its belligerence (compared to Harmony) and youthfulness (compared to LKS), and active use of social networks, influencers, and TikTok in particular. The party avoids talking about the war in Ukraine directly, instead putting its emphasis on populist criticism of: the US air defense in the Baltic States; the ban on Russian television; the use of Latvian as the educational language in public schools; the removal of Soviet monuments and memorials, etc. "Why such provocations? [...] Maybe it's worth showing at least some diplomacy towards our neighbor,"<sup>156</sup> said one of its leaders, Amils Šaļimovs. Some of the content from the party's members' social networks has been used by Russian propaganda channels to criticize Latvia. It must be noted that the party is already on the Latvian State Security Service (VDD)<sup>157</sup> radar, and its MPs are at risk of not receiving access to state secrets. The reasons for that go beyond their pro-Russian statements. One of the MPs lied about her education before being elected; another MP is accused of involvement in tobacco smuggling.

The fourth party fighting for Russian-speaking voters, but with very little success was Sovereign Power, run by former members of Harmony and other, previously dissolved catch-all parties that spring up before each election. The face of this party, Julia Stepaņenko, entered politics with Harmony; however, in recent years she has changed parties multiple times. Stepaņenko is a typical populist, and has recently adopted a passionate anti-vaccination, anti-LGBT rights position while claiming to be a staunch supporter of "traditional" Christian and family values. The general consensus is that despite her relatively well-known personality, no other party was interested in including her in their list, and hence, she created her own catch-all party riding on the most contradicting issues in Latvian society. Sovereign Power is not strictly pro-Russian, but most of its members come from pro-Russian factions, and its tar-

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get audience is the Russian-speaking population. The party has not explicitly stated its stance towards the war in Ukraine.<sup>158</sup> In the parliamentary elections, Sovereign Power received only 3.5% of votes and did not make it to Parliament.

It is noteworthy that pro-Russian parties did very well in Daugavpils, a city adjacent to the border with Russia and Belarus and a sore spot for any potential Russian invasion and separatist scenarios. Almost 80% of Daugavpils' population are ethnic Russians, and its proximity to the Russian border (and distance from the capital city of Riga) also exposes it to the Russian information sphere. This is reflected in the election results. In contrast to the national results, in Daugavpils Stability! received 26.01%, Harmony – 16.89%, LKS – 10.95%, and Sovereign Power – 7.53%.<sup>159</sup> Even the Latvian parties that did pass the 5% barrier in Daugavpils are populist parties with vague national stances that have not condemned Russia for its aggression. Furthermore, the Mayor of Daugavpils, Andrejs Elksniņš (Harmony), has gone against Harmony's stance and has not condemned Russian aggression, even going so far as to state in an interview that Crimea is a part of Russia, causing an uproar in Latvian society and criticism from his own party.<sup>160</sup>

## FUTURE OF PRO-RUSSIAN POLITICS

Looking into the future – it is unlikely that either Stability! or Sovereign Power will be long-term players in national politics. Both are typical populist parties without clear goals or any prospects for attaining national power. Their leaders are known to switch party allegiances often and do not have a stable electorate. That does not mean, however, that the same people will not establish new catch-all pro-Russian parties before the next regional or parliamentary election and achieve similar results. LKS will most likely remain on the political scene as it has for so long, but will continue to play a marginal role. Its leader, European MP Tatjana Ždanoka,

is the party's only driving force, and neither she nor her messages are particularly appealing for the younger generations of Russian speakers. Harmony, on the other hand should not be written off as a political party, as it had a very stable power base, and it would be wrong to assume that all Russian speakers are also pro-Russian Federation and in favor of the war it is waging in Ukraine.

The fact that parties aimed at the Russian-speaking electorate did not do well does not necessarily demonstrate Westernization in Latvian politics. However, Harmony's move to condemn Russian violence should be seen as a positive step towards Western values and norms. It may perhaps benefit the party in the future, especially as it has maintained its stance even after losing the election. In general, these developments in Latvian politics should be seen as a crisis of the Russian world, which makes ethnic Russians living in Latvia reconsider their allegiances and standards. Many Russian speakers prefer living in Latvia with its democratic values, freedom of speech, freedom of travel, EU benefits (though that does not stop them from criticizing these same values). Meanwhile, they are proud and romantic about their heritage, and in their eyes, the Russian Federation has remained as a sort of a promised land that they admire from a distance, but don't actually want to move to. At the same time, the war has demonstrated that there is a large Russian-speaking population that is loyal to Latvia and not susceptible to Russian propaganda. As a rule, the more educated and younger population feel that they belong in Latvia.

The side note to this, however, is the Westernization of Latvian society in general. Ethnic Latvians have become increasingly suspicious and outspoken to any pro-Russian message or sentiments, where previously they would have "held their tongues". The war in Ukraine has made Latvian policy makers braver, not only in the foreign, but also domestic politics. It is likely to bring an even further break from Latvia's

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Soviet history as other areas of life Westernize. Many pro-Putin Russians have been blacklisted, Latvia has closed its borders to Russian tourists, public schools are rapidly completing the full transition to Latvian as the exclusive language of instruction, and Russian as a second

foreign language in schools will be replaced by German, Spanish, and other European languages. One of the most symbolic trends has been removal of Soviet statues and memorials, with the demolishing of the Victory Monument resonating the most.

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# LITHUANIA:

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## The Final Decoupling from Russia's Energy Supply

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**Tomas Janeliūnas**

For Lithuania, dependence on Russian energy sources was the most sensitive link with Russia for many years, even after its accession to the EU and NATO in 2004. Diversifying energy imports was a crucial task for Lithuania's energy security, as the country's energy import dependency level was one of the highest in the EU: in 2020, it stood at above 70%, and 96.1% of all imported energy came from Russia.<sup>161</sup> Although Lithuania already had the infrastructure in place allowing it to import oil and gas from global energy markets (namely, an oil termi-

nal and a Floating Storage Regasification Unit – FSRU), the main flows of energy sources still came from Russia.

In 2022, Lithuania succeeded in completely cutting off Russian supplies of oil, gas, and electricity. The main trigger was Russia's military aggression and full-scale war in Ukraine, which became the final call to minimize energy dependence on Russia for almost all EU member states, though Lithuania became the first one to decouple from Russia's energy supply in practice. This was possible thanks to thorough preparation in advance and infrastructure projects aimed at diversifying Lithuania's energy imports.



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## INTEGRATION INTO THE EU GAS MARKET: THE GIPL PIPELINE

For a long time, Gazprom was the only gas supplier to Lithuania, a monopoly that allowed the Russian state oil company to manipulate gas prices. Back in 2011, the Lithuanian Government filed a complaint with the European Commission (EC) requesting an investigation into Gazprom's abuse of its dominant position, and in 2018, the EC imposed obligations on Gazprom to facilitate the unrestricted flow of gas at competitive prices in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>162</sup>

However, the real game-changer was the FRSU (Floating Storage Regasification Unit), or more simply, Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) terminal, docked at the Lithuanian port of Klaipėda at the end of 2014. The FRSU, named "Independence," became the first LNT terminal on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea and opened a way for alternative supplies of gas for all three Baltic states and Poland. As then-President of Lithuania Dalia Grybauskaitė announced at the terminal's opening ceremony, "it will be a security guarantee for the whole region. If necessary, it will be able to cover 90 percent of the three Baltic States' gas supply needs. From now on, nobody will dictate the price for gas to us – or buy our political will."<sup>163</sup>

In 2022, the final line connecting Lithuania (and the other Baltic states) to the continental EU gas network was completed. In Spring 2022, the construction of the 508 km-long pipeline connecting the Polish and Lithuanian gas transmission systems was successfully completed. The full-scale commissioning of the Gas Interconnection Poland – Lithuania (GIPL) project took place in October 2022.<sup>164</sup> By May 1, 2022, Lithuania was already able to exchange natural gas with Europe via the GIPL and opened a new, alternative source of gas transportation to the region.<sup>165</sup>

Completing the GIPL pipeline ahead of the planned schedule was extremely important amid the European energy crisis after the Russian invasion to Ukraine. Cutting gas supplies to EU countries was another attempt by the Kremlin to pressure Euro-

peans into stopping their military, economic, and political support for Ukraine. As the report of the Danish Institute of International Relations pointed out, "ever since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania consistently called for greater unity within the EU and stronger sanctions on Russian fossil fuels. They also urged their EU partners not to cave into pressure for payments for Russian gas in rubles." By the end of April 2022, Gazprom had halted gas exports to Poland (and Bulgaria) over Warsaw's refusal to pay for supplies in rubles.

Poland had already been preparing to get rid of Russian gas for years, as its long-term contract with Gazprom had to cease at the end of 2022. The new pipeline connecting Norway and Poland (the Baltic Pipe) was projected to become the major alternative line replacing gas flows from Russia. In the meantime, the completion of the GILP pipeline and the ability to import LNG through Lithuania's FRSU was the most needed backup at the right moment.

For Lithuania, the gas connection with Poland was not only a symbol of full-fledged integration into the European gas network, but also an important pillar of its gas supply diversification. "During geopolitical tensions, linking the Baltic and Finnish gas markets with the European gas market guarantees energy security and independence for the entire region," Lithuanian Energy minister Dainius Kreivys explained.<sup>166</sup>

## NO MORE ENERGY IMPORTS FROM RUSSIA

In the Spring of 2022, Lithuania became the first EU country to completely halt energy imports from Russia. By early April, Lithuania had completely abandoned Russian gas, and was ensuring all of its gas needs via the Klaipėda LNG terminal with cargo from the US and other countries. The move was then entrenched as a point of no return by law: in June 2022, Lithuania's parliament approved amendments to the country's Law on Natural Gas banning gas imports from Russia and other countries deemed a threat to national security.<sup>167</sup>

The Polish energy company PKN Orlen, operating the only oil refinery in Lithuania, stopped buying



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Russian crude oil on the spot market in March, and since April, no Russian oil was delivered to Lithuania.<sup>168</sup> This shift contributed to the confidence of the Lithuanian government in pushing for a Russian oil embargo at the EU level.

**The final step was made by the Nord Pool, a pan-European power exchange, which announced it was ending operations with Russian electricity suppliers as of May 22, due to risks of failure to pay for power supplies from Russia.<sup>169</sup> That means that no Russian electricity was traded to Lithuanian consumers since May 2022, although the electricity imports from Kaliningrad to Lithuania once represented about 20% of all of Lithuania's electricity imports. The Lithuanian Ministry of Energy officially announced that they would be completely cutting imports of Russian energy supplies, i.e., oil, electricity, and natural gas.**

“Not only it is an extremely important milestone for Lithuania in its journey towards energy independence, but it is also an expression of our solidarity with Ukraine. We must stop financing the Russian war machine,” said Dainius Kreivys, the Lithuanian Minister of Energy.<sup>170</sup>

The complete decoupling from Russian energy seems like a stunning achievement, given the total dependence ratio on energy imports in Lithuania, and all of the post-Soviet infrastructure networks connecting the country with Russia. However, this change did not happen overnight, and was not without costs. For example, back in 2014, the political decision to build an LNG terminal seemed to be controversial and appeared to have little economic justification: LNG prices were above the pipeline costs and Lithuanian consumers had to pay an additional fee for the terminal maintenance on their gas bills. But this project was always regarded as an insurance instrument and as Financial Times concluded in 2022, “the insurance policy has been cashed in”.<sup>171</sup>

Limiting electricity imports from Russia contributed to price chokes in 2022. On some days in the summer of 2022, Lithuania and Latvia had the highest electricity prices on the Nord Pool exchange. Consequently, this had an additional impact on inflation, which reached the highest rates within the EU, at 21.4% in November 2022.<sup>172</sup> And yet, this is a small price to pay for independence from Russia.

#### SYNCHRONIZING THE ELECTRICITY GRID

The last task for Lithuania (and all the Baltic States) to finalize energy independence from Russia is switching from the so-called BRELL grid, a Soviet relic controlled from Moscow, to the continental European electricity grid. BRELL is an agreement between electricity transmission grid operators from Belarus, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania on technical conditions and rules for managing the power systems to ensure the required power quality parameters and stability of the grid. The Baltic countries plan to decouple from the BRELL system by late 2025 or sooner,

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if possible. An additional electricity connection between Lithuania and Poland (the so-called Harmony Link) is crucial for this task. The Baltic States already have the capacity right now to synchronize with continental Europe in an emergency,

but that would be more complex and expensive. Once the grid through Poland has been synchronized, the Baltic States will be fully integrated into the EU energy markets, and the last vulnerable link with Russia will be severed.

# MOLDOVA:

## Amid Energy Crisis, Chisinau Eyes Strengthening its Energy Independence

**Leonid Litra**

2022 has been an extremely difficult year for Moldova. The Russian war against Ukraine created multiple crises and amplified existing problems in Moldova. Chisinau had to deal with simultaneous challenges, from Covid-19 to a refugee crisis. However, once the war “stabilized”, the most pressing issue for Moldovan leadership and society became the energy crisis. Given the difficult situation and the Kremlin’s repeated attempts to use its monopolistic position to silence Moldovan support for Ukraine,

Chisinau has so far proved agile in avoiding Russian energy blackmail.

### THE STATE OF PLAY IN MOLDOVA’S ELECTRICITY AND GAS SUPPLY

Just a few days ahead of the Russian attack on Ukraine, Chisinau and Kyiv joined the ENTSO-E (European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity) which synchronizes the national electric grid with the European electricity market. Integration with the EU electricity transport system was



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meant to give Moldova more flexibility in addressing the growing pressure of energy commodities on national policies.

At the same time, Moldovan leadership had a bitter experience involving their contract with Gazprom in 2021. At the time, the Russian gas monopolist was significantly reducing gas supplies in order to pressure Moldova into accepting the Russian “offer” as the old contract expired and before a new one had been signed. Moldova did enter into a new contract with Gazprom, however the experience with Russia using energy as a “weapon” prompted the Moldovan government to prepare better for the next season.

The availability of alternative gas supplies was possible due to upgrades to Moldova’s energy infrastructure. Namely, with the support of the EU and Romania, Moldova was able to build the Iasi-Ungheni gas interconnector and a new gas pipeline to Chisinau. For the first time, it was possible to import enough gas from the West, and from suppliers other than Gazprom. However, the system had not been used before due to high prices on the spot markets, and therefore was meant to be “activated” in response to any new attempts by Russia to blackmail Moldova.<sup>173</sup>

In early 2022, the Moldovan government decided to create gas reserves in order to avoid any gas shortages should Russia decide to cut the supply. To do this, Moldova obtained a credit worth \$300 million from the EBRD to purchase gas reserves.<sup>174</sup> By mid-autumn, Moldova had stored over 200 million cubic meters of gas in Romania and Ukraine, enough to cover two winter months’ of use for the entire country (without the Transnistrian region).

As Moldova’s leadership expected, by the fall of 2022, Russia had already started to progressively reduce the amounts of gas supplied, below their contract commitments. In December 2022, Gazprom unilaterally reduced the amount of gas supplied, and was delivering just 56.6% of its contractual commitments.<sup>175</sup> In Chisinau, the Russian decision to reduce the gas supply was interpreted as an attempt to force Moldova into changing its rhetoric on the

Russian war against Ukraine and pressure to follow Russian “instructions”.

Chisinau was also suffering from an electricity shortage. In the second half of 2022, Moldova also stopped receiving electricity supply from the Russian-managed power plant (MGRES) in the breakaway region of Transnistria. This was not a decision freely made by Chisinau, but a result of Russia limiting access to cheap electricity in an attempt to exert pressure. Chisinau was saved by emergency electricity supplies provided by Romania, some of which was purchased through bilateral contracts at a price roughly 1/3 higher (EUR 90 MW) than the price of MGRES (EUR 64), while the rest was purchased at a very high price – sometimes exceeding EUR 380 MW.<sup>176</sup> Despite the assistance from Romania, the Russian missile attacks on Ukraine’s energy infrastructure led to several blackouts in Moldova, as the Romanian electricity supply must transit through Ukraine to reach Moldova, and any attacks on Ukraine’s system has an impact on the electricity delivery to Moldova. Therefore, Moldova’s biggest challenge is now ensuring a stable gas and electricity supply while maintaining affordable prices.

The working plan is to build two direct high-voltage lines between Romania and Moldova. These projects are currently underway and are expected to be completed in 2025. Until then, Moldova has resorted to temporary models aimed at covering today’s needs.

## A TEMPORARY SOLUTION WITHOUT BLACKMAIL OR HIGH PRICES

To address both issues of gas and electricity supplies, Moldova cut a deal with the Russian proxies in Transnistria (MGRES) to provide cheap electricity in exchange for gas. It was decided that the breakaway region will receive the entire volume of gas supplied by Gazprom (now reduced by 56,6%) with the condition that a part of this gas would be used by MGRES (Russia’ controlled electricity producer)

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to produce electricity to be sold to Moldova at an advantageous price of USD 73 per MW.<sup>177</sup> Previously, Moldova spent several months importing electricity from Romania at a much higher price as part of emergency supplies, which helped overcome the electricity deficit, albeit the very high price. The higher prices for electricity were challenging the political environment in Moldova due to the dissatisfaction of a part of the population and the ever-growing difficulties for business.

**Although pricing was a major argument, the security of energy supplies was an equally important reason for signing the contract, in the face of blackouts caused by the Russian attacks in Ukraine. Currently, Moldova's supply is stable, despite the attacks on Ukraine. Due to Moldova and Ukraine's integrated system, a stable electricity supply to Moldova inadvertently has a small benefit for Ukraine, especially to the region of Odesa.**

This is because when one part of the grid has stable electricity, it becomes easier to ensure balance within the system and therefore provide a stable supply to Ukraine, as well.

An indirect but significant outcome of the new arrangement is that for the first time since independence, Moldova (without Transnistria) is not dependent on Russian gas. Moldova's biggest challenge is now ensuring that this is a lasting formula available for the next several years. That is why the government is already starting to prepare for the next winter. One of the possibilities might involve getting gas from Azerbaijan through the contract between Bucharest and Baku.

Despite the advantages, the contract with MGRES is also a difficult compromise for Moldova. First, it is indirectly funding the separatist regime in Tiraspol by providing cash for the electricity supplied to Chisinau, while the breakaway region does not pay for the gas it consumes. For Chisinau, the cash supply for Transnistria is also inertial, since Moldova would need to have a plan in place for if the regime in Transnistria collapses, and Chisinau has an interest in not leaving the region entirely out of cash. The second reason is that all of the gas from Moldova's contract is sent to Tiraspol, leaving Moldova to find costly alternatives. Through its contract with Gazprom, Moldova was supposed to receive 406 million cubic metres of gas in December, but only received 176.6 million cubic meters, all of which were sent to Tiraspol. Out of these, approximately 77.2 million cubic meters of gas were used to produce electricity for Moldova at MGRES – indirectly this is a return to Moldova in the form of electricity – the most needed commodity now.<sup>178</sup>

The remaining gas for Tiraspol, which is not used for electricity production, is sufficient to have full heating season, but insufficient for industrial production. The two main gas consumers, the steel plant and the cement plant, are already operating at lower capacity and when the temperatures drop below 0 degrees Celsius, it will be even harder to maintain industrial operations.

The contract with MGRES also made it possible to revise prices, providing relief for the population and businesses alike, as energy prices have an indirect impact on the price of other goods and on business

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involving production is dependent on electricity. Prices decreased in early December 2022 and once again in early January 2023. Low prices, combined with significant compensations for nearly half of the population, are reducing energy pressure on political decisions, and therefore, on Russian influence. Some experts have mentioned that if Moldova had continued to buy electricity at spot markets, then the prices would have grown significantly, which in turn could have caused businesses to close and the GDP to shrink by 8-9%. A big role in mitigating the problem of high prices was played by Moldova's partners – the EU and the US – who provided financial support to Chisinau to address the issue.

## OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

In 2022, Moldova saw relative success in its response to Russia's weaponizing energy. For the first time in history, Chisinau does not rely on Russian gas supplies and is able to ignore Russia's attempts to exert pressure by leveraging its energy suprema-

cy. This in turn has multiple effects, since it places Moldova in a better position during any negotiations with Russia. Moreover, creating gas reserves in advance weakened Russian attempts to weaponize energy and exploit Moldova's vulnerability. Thanks to Moldova's gas reserves, the Kremlin does not see any advantage in completely cutting off gas to Moldova, as it would not achieve its goals and might lose even more influence in Chisinau.

By moving away from Russian energy blackmail, Moldova is able to better integrate with the European Union energy market and also build commercial relations without any strings attached. This Westernization of the energy sector, which had suffered from years of opaque deals and a subtext of corruption, was sorely needed. In the coming years, Moldova's most difficult task will be ensuring that this newly strengthened energy independence remains sustainable and based on stable contracts. This will be a challenge, as current costs and constantly operating in crisis management mode have rendered the system fragile.

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# TAJIKISTAN:

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## China is Pushing Russia out of the Country

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**Parviz Mullojanov**

The issue of Chinese military bases appearing in Tajikistan is still one of the most discussed and, at the same time, controversial and non-transparent aspects of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) presence in post-Soviet Central Asia. Indeed, Tajikistan is the only former Soviet republic that has considered allowing the PRC to set up a temporary or permanent military base. On the other hand, this aspect of cooperation with China is strictly classified, and both sides deny that

the PRC has any military bases in Tajikistan at all. These statements largely contradict unofficial data provided by various analytical departments, expert groups, and journalistic studies. All treaties and agreements on military cooperation between the two countries are confidential, which raises a number of additional questions regarding their true nature, scope, and outlook. In addition, this military cooperation is taking place against a backdrop of Tajikistan's growing financial dependence on China. Today, China is already Tajikistan's main creditor, investor,



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and trading partner, having pushed Russia and other CIS aside long ago.

In this regard, the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan and Russia's invasion of Ukraine raise a number of additional questions. In particular, to what extent are recent events changing the region's geopolitical situation – can we speak about Russia's weakened position in post-Soviet Central Asia, as it is supplanted by China? Over the past few years, we have heard more than once about the region's peculiar duumvirate model, in which Russia dominates security while China leads economy and finance. Again, could the rapidly increasing Chinese military presence in Tajikistan be evidence that Russia is ready to de facto cede the region to China in exchange for geopolitical support for its confrontation with the West over Ukraine?

### MOSCOW'S POSITION AND INITIAL CONSULTATIONS

The issue of a Chinese military base in Central Asia first became the topic of public debate in 2017. Prior to this, the expert community shared a widespread belief that Moscow would not allow any third countries to set up military bases in former Soviet republics. It was known that the Kremlin has always reacted extremely painfully to any issues related to the growth of influence of other powers in the post-Soviet space. In particular, in 2011, Moscow got its CSTO allies to sign an agreement stating that third countries were allowed to build new military bases on the territory of member states only after all other members had given their consent.<sup>179</sup> In 2014, under obvious pressure from Moscow, the US closed its Manas military base in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>180</sup> It is noteworthy that the process of eliminating the American base was initiated back in 2008, shortly after Vladimir Putin's now-famous Munich speech, in which Moscow leadership expressed its main geopolitical claims to the "collective West" for the first time.<sup>181</sup>

In 2017, China and Russia first began confidential negotiations regarding the expansion of Chinese military presence in the region. In particular, during this period, Radio Azattyq reported: "The Development Research Center in Beijing, with ties to the government, hosted several leading Russian researchers to sound out the response to the possible deployment of Chinese security forces in Tajikistan."<sup>182</sup> According to testimonies from meeting participants, at that time, the idea was presented as the creation of a monitoring and logistics center, and not a formal military base in Tajikistan. Apparently, Moscow's reaction was, if not positive, at least rather restrained, allowing the PRC to take its first steps to expanding military presence in the region. We can also assume that Dushanbe received formal approval from Moscow to allow the Chinese military's presence in its territory. It is unlikely that the Tajik government would take such a step without prior Russian approval. This was when the term "duumvirate" became commonplace among the expert community as it attempted to ascertain the nature and specific of Chinese and Russian cooperation in Central Asia.

The reasons behind Russia's unexpectedly tolerant attitude towards foreign advances into the region are easily explained – firstly, after the annexation of Crimea, Moscow needed the PRC's support as it saw itself increasingly clashing with the West. Good relations with China remain critical for the Russian leadership in the face of toughening international sanctions, primarily in the high-tech and energy sectors. Therefore, in these new conditions, Moscow is simply wary of conflict with Beijing so as not to lose ties with the country that has become almost its only relatively loyal geopolitical partner and potential ally among world powers. Secondly, Moscow no longer has enough resources to even maintain its influence in the region, especially since last February's military invasion of Ukraine. Vladimir Putin's focus on the



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“Ukrainian issue” and confrontation with the West creates a de facto geopolitical vacuum in Central Asia, which many international and regional players are trying to fill today, from Turkey and Iran to Islamic jihadists and ISIS. However, the most serious contender for the role of Moscow’s geopolitical successor in the region is Beijing – this is primarily due to its financial and economic resources and local economies’ growing dependence on China.

According to Alexander Gabuev, the military base “was an unpleasant surprise for Russia, but Moscow is well aware that China’s military presence will be limited to Tajikistan. [The Kremlin] does not want further Chinese expansion in the region, but since China is already there, they will strive to cooperate.”<sup>183</sup> From this, we can conclude that Beijing has given informal guarantees to Moscow that its military expansion into the region will be limited to the territory of Tajikistan. Under such conditions, Moscow was forced to agree since it still did not have any effective mechanisms available to prevent this expansion.

#### FROM DISCUSSION TO PRACTICAL STEPS

In 2016, Dushanbe and Beijing signed an agreement on cooperation in protecting the Tajik-Afghan border, according to which China committed to financing the construction of eleven border posts and creating 30-40 posts on the Tajik side of the border with Afghanistan. Citizens of Tajikistan will serve on these posts, while all expenses for the maintenance and operations are paid by China. The details of the agreement are unknown, but its provisions are very reminiscent of the terms of the Russian-Tajik border agreement that expired in 2005. Then, the Russian side also financed guarding the Tajik-Afghan border, despite the fact that the staff was mainly Tajik.

**In 2019, the joint Tajik-Chinese “Cooperation-2019” training took place in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), attracting attention both domestically and abroad, raising eyebrows both at home and abroad.<sup>184</sup> In many ways, interest in this event was also due to the Moscow’s official silence, as well as of that of the pro-Kremlin media. According to official reports, the training was organized in order to work out the cooperation mechanism for repelling a possible breakthrough of jihadist militants across the Tajik-Afghan border.**

At that time, according to the Republic of Tajikistan border service, the northern regions of Afghanistan had accumulated several thousand extremists, including people from the post-Soviet republics and Chinese Xinjiang.<sup>185</sup>

In early 2018, The Washington Post reported a Chinese military outpost in the Murghab region, in the southeastern part of GBAO, just 10 km from the

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Wakhan corridor<sup>186</sup> and the Tajik-Afghan border.<sup>187</sup> In reference to the Chinese military personnel and local residents, the Washington Post also reported that the mini-base has been operating for almost three years, since the conclusion of the Tajik-Chinese agreement in 2016. The report made waves both within Tajikistan and abroad. The Chinese government refused to comment; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan stated that “there are no military bases of the People’s Republic of China on the territory of Tajikistan, there were no negotiations on the creation of one, and none are in progress.”<sup>188</sup> Meanwhile, US government sources told The Washington Post that they are aware of the existence of the base but do not object to the Chinese presence in Tajikistan, since the poorly guarded border posed a threat to the entire region. At the same time, the Tajik Radio Liberty (Radio Svoboda) office claims that according to the official text of the agreement, although the base in Murghab belonged to Tajikistan, Chinese personnel were deployed on its territory. In addition, starting in 2019, news broke about a de facto joint border service with China in the GBAO along the Tajik-Afghan border. According to media publications, the Chinese military carried out surveillance patrols in some of the most difficult border districts.

In October 2021, shortly after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan, it was officially announced that China would build another base in Tajikistan for the special operations forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (UBOP) of Tajikistan’s Department for Combating Organized Crime.<sup>189</sup> According to the intergovernmental agreement, the 3550 sq. meters military complex should be built in the Wakhan Valley in the Nohiya-i Ishkoshim region (GBAO), near the Afghanistan border. Beijing pledged to allocate a ¥55 million (\$8.5 million) grant for the project’s implementation. The draft agreement was submitted to the Parliament of the Republic of Tajikistan for approval. At the same time, according to the government and parliamentary deputies, the training center under

construction would belong to Tajikistan without Chinese military presence at the base.<sup>190</sup>

Now, information on both military bases, as well as on the entire spectrum of China’s military presence in the region, is strictly classified. Both the Chinese and Tajik governments officially deny the existence of Chinese military bases in the country; very little is also known about the bases’ structure, readiness, and operations. However, according to Radio Ozodi, in July 2020, during the visit of Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe to Dushanbe, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon allegedly offered to transfer control over the Murghab base to China.

#### WHAT’S NEXT? KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Thus, the question of the nature and scale of the PRC’s military presence in the region is still under consideration, not least by Beijing itself. The Russian invasion of Ukraine could not but affect the mood in the region. We must also consider the rapid and radical changes due to the political situation in Afghanistan. Previously, Chinese diplomacy could expect the Sino-Russian duumvirate to last for at least a decade longer. Initially, China did not plan to starkly increase its military presence in the region, having intended to gradually increase economic dominance in Central Asia while leaving security matters to Russia.

However, the geopolitical situation in Central Asia is rapidly changing, as is the case throughout the entire post-Soviet space. This inevitably leads China to understand the need to reassess its capabilities and prospects under the new conditions. As Russia is clearly no longer able to effectively ensure proper levels of regional security, the role of the guarantor state (or at least part of its security functions and responsibilities) is gradually shifting to the PRC. In particular, PRC leadership has repeatedly expressed its concerns about the accumulation of jihadist groups (including from

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among Chinese Uyghurs) in Afghanistan. This concern grew exponentially following the Taliban's return to power, forcing Chinese, Russian, and local leadership to take measures to neutralize new threats. The PRC is implementing a two-part strategy as part of this endeavor. Firstly, China is attempting to negotiate with the Taliban to involve them in its economic mega-projects (under the Belt and Road Initiative, TAPI pipeline, etc.) and, thus, to convince the new Afghan government to withdraw its support for international jihadists. Secondly, China is building up its military presence on the Tajik-Afghan border, trying to avail itself of an additional outpost and a second line of defense against the possible breakthrough of religious extremists into the post-Soviet countries and directly on the Chinese border.

In many respects, the threat from Uyghur "jihadist separatists" in Afghanistan looks a bit exaggerated: it is difficult to imagine that sufficient numbers of them will be able to force their way through to the Chinese border in the foreseeable future. Even if they did, it is even more difficult to imagine that the Uyghur fighters would be any serious competition for the Chinese Army. Therefore, from a purely military point of view, it makes no sense for the Chinese leadership to create a full-fledged military base in Tajikistan or anywhere else in the region. However,

the "jihadist threat" is a good pretext for China to consolidate its economic, security, and military geopolitical interests in Central Asia. The more Russia gets bogged down in its geopolitical confrontation with the West, the less China (as well as Russia's local allies in the CSTO and the SCO) will reckon with the opinion and imperial ambitions of Moscow's leadership. In this regard, the position of Putin's government is of particular interest – one can say that it has de facto "sacrificed" its influence in Tajikistan for the sake of a general and rather vague idea of a joint strategic partnership and of even an "anti-Western alliance" with China. It is difficult to say to what extent Moscow was fully aware of this choice and its potential consequences – perhaps, as during the collapse of the USSR, Moscow built priorities based on the assumption that the former Soviet republics would not go anywhere, and it would always be able to come back and make up for any losses.

In this context, the issue still lies with Beijing and whether it will see compliance with any informal agreements with Moscow over the possible division of spheres of influence as necessary or not. In any case, the general trend is that rapidly growing economic dependence will eventually lead to a transition of dependence in geopolitical, security, and military affairs. China's military presence in Central Asia is yet another confirmation of this geopolitical truism.

# TURKMENISTAN:

## Power Handed Down from Father to Son

**Sergiy Solodkyy**

Turkmenistan rarely appears on the pages of the world press. The country is habitually perceived as extremely closed off from the outside world, with minimal levels of citizens' rights and freedoms and a powerful, repressive apparatus to crack down on any dissidents. Only one thing can draw any interest to an ordinary authoritarian regime that has remained static for such a long time – changes to the ruling elite. Early presidential elections in Turkmenistan, held on March 12, 2022, were able to break through some kind of informational blockade – the global media devoted a lot of materials to an extraordinary political event. Everyone was interested in one question: why did 64-year-old President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov decide to actually “gift” power to his 40-year-old son, Serdar? Such a cas-

ting move could not bring any changes to political life in Turkmenistan – it rather testified to the desire of the Berdimuhamedov family to strengthen their position. The elder Berdimuhamedov is not going to leave political affairs; he chairs the Halk Maslahaty, the upper chamber of Parliament, which allows him to remain the most influential person in the government. Turkmenistan is consistently ranked last in the Westernization Index. The transfer of power from father to son only strengthens Turkmenistan's reputation as a country opposed to any democratic norms.

### THE TRANSFER OF POWER IN THE BLITZKRIEG MODE

Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov came to power in 2007 after the death of Saparmurat Niyazov. For some time, observers hoped to see changes in the



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country: after all, the dictator, who was brought up on rigid Soviet management traditions, was replaced by a man with a fulfilling political career in the post-Soviet period. But these hopes were not justified, as Berdimuhamedov was a politician who cut his teeth in the authoritarian mold of Niyazov's personality cult. The only change that a new president could provide was to exchange one cult of personality for another. He was re-elected three times for the presidency, each time winning with over 90% of the votes.<sup>191</sup>

In the Freedom House 2022 report, the level of freedoms in Turkmenistan was rated as 2 out of a possible 100 points.<sup>192</sup> The country is recognized as a repressive authoritarian state, where political rights and civil liberties are not respected. Observers weren't particularly surprised by rumors dating back to 2021 that the elder Berdimuhamedov was preparing to hand power over to his son. The elder president tried to create some semblance of respect for due process (and the rule of law, although this process entailed some embarrassment, which hardly bothered the representatives of the Turkmen regime). The problem, for example, was that while still President, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov was also chair of the upper chamber of Parliament. He therefore had to step down as President, but first transferred presidential duties to the head of the upper house of Parliament – that is, himself. However amusing, the incident ultimately did not matter, however, as everyone understood that it was a well-planned operation to transfer power as an inheritance to his son. Only one month was allotted for the presidential campaign itself, highlighting the fact that the entire exercise was a mere formality.

In countries with authoritarian regimes, post-Soviet political elites have repeatedly tried on a similar model of power succession. At least, such scenarios have been repeatedly discussed in the press in relation to Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Belarus. A successful case of hereditary transfer of power in the post-Soviet

space occurred in Azerbaijan in 2003. However, in this case, Heydar Aliyev allowed his son to take the presidency as he stood down himself, shortly before his death. In Turkmenistan, the situation is different since the father and son now actually rule the country together – therefore, observers sometimes refer to the current model of governance as a duumvirate or “tan-democracy”.<sup>193</sup>

**Why did Gurbanguly take a step like this? One of the most popular hypotheses is that he was hoping to ensure a stable, controlled transition of power. The unsuccessful examples of other countries in the region could have inspired him to take decisive action, e.g., primarily Kazakhstan, where ex-President Nursultan Nazarbayev failed to retain political influence. “By combining a dynastic succession with a ruling duumvirate, Gurbanguly appears to be hoping to avoid some of the pitfalls suffered by previous succession models in the region,” Chatham House concluded.<sup>194</sup>**

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Nazarbayev relied on agreements and the loyalty of political elites, while Gurbanguly decided not to take any risks, preferring to concentrate power within his family.

Serdar has spent at least the past five years preparing for the presidency, and, for some time, his father will be able to control how effectively he manages to settle into the main post. In recent years, the younger Berdimuhamedov has served as Deputy Prime Minister, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Industry, and Governor of his father's native Ahal region, where a new \$1.5 billion urban project is being built.<sup>195</sup> It relates to the creation of a new administrative center of the Arkadag region – the name reflects Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov's official title. The local press, officials, and citizens in general refer to the second Turkmen President as "Arkadag", literally translated from the Turkmen "the mountain behind", or more poetically, "protector".<sup>196</sup>

## HOW "TANDEMOCRACY" AFFECTS TURKMENISTAN'S WESTERNIZATION

Turkmenistan's first year with a presidential father-son duo in power did not bring any surprises. The former president has not lost his control over the country's rule. The new president is not trying to make any changes to the order, which was established mostly during the time of Saparmurat Niyazov. Changing the President's name did not affect political freedoms; the socio-economic situation in Turkmenistan remains in a rather critical condition. As an obedient son, Serdar seems to serve as a rather ceremonial figure; his father retains the real levers of influence on political processes. State media regularly covers the activities of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov as Chairman of the Halk Maslahaty (upper chamber of Parliament). His meetings with foreign partners are presented as important elements of parliamentary diplomacy.<sup>197</sup>

In foreign policy, Turkmenistan continues to adhere to its policy of neutrality, although the in-

fluence of Russia and China is growing. Experts noted the Turkmen authorities' intensifying efforts to diversify export gas supplies in recent years.<sup>198</sup> Gas resources are one of the most important instruments of Ashgabat's foreign policy, they are also the main source that provides for the maintenance of socio-economic and political stability. Turkmenistan's key energy partners are China (the main buyer of Turkmen gas) and Russia.<sup>199</sup> In the midst of the Russian aggression against Ukraine and the ambiguous position of Beijing, which is inclined to support Moscow, such dependence makes Turkmenistan vulnerable in many ways. If economic problems worsen in China and Russia, Ashgabat's gas revenues will also fall, forcing Turkmenistan to seriously think about expanding partnerships in this area. The Indian and Pakistani markets are one potential avenue for diversifying gas exports, via the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline project. Delivery to EU countries seems impossible, as Russia and Iran, for obvious reasons, will block the construction of an underwater Trans-Caspian gas pipeline linking the Turkmen city of Turkmenbashi and Baku in Azerbaijan. This gas pipeline could allow the export of Turkmen gas through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey to the EU member states.<sup>200</sup>

Serdar Berdimuhamedov made his first foreign visit to Russia, and held several meetings and telephone conversations with Putin during his first year as President. Turkmenistan has no intention of developing dialogue with the West. Ashgabat is proud of its neutral status and avoided expressing any position at all regarding Russia's war against Ukraine – at meetings of the UN General Assembly, the Turkmen delegation did not vote for resolutions regarding Russian aggression. The media reported that officials in Turkmenistan carried out pro-Russian propaganda activities. Turkmenistan authorities accused Western countries of inciting the war in Ukraine and justified Moscow's actions.<sup>201</sup> In December 2022, Turkmenistan's representative left the hall during a speech by the head of the Ministry of

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Foreign Affairs of Ukraine at a meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council.<sup>202</sup>

None of the experts interviewed are able to predict how the situation in Turkmenistan will play out. The father-son power sharing may eventually prove a difficult test for the Berdimuhamedovs: the son's

lack of experience forces him to actually listen to his father, who continues to play a leading role in the life of the country. But even if tensions rise within the ruling clan, it is unlikely that the country will see any significant democratic changes in the foreseeable future.

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# UKRAINE:

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## The Russian War Provoked a Large-Scale Westernization

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### Sergiy Solodkyy

Throughout post-Soviet history, the issue of forming an identity capable of uniting citizens from different regions was occasionally raised in Ukraine. Some of society preferred shifting toward the West (with a course towards the EU and NATO), while another part sided with Russia, and the third segment insisted on finding a “golden mean” of pragmatic coexistence between Rus-

sia and the West. The beginning of Russia’s aggression in 2014, which led to the occupation of Crimea and parts of the eastern regions of Ukraine, had completely excluded the pro-Russian vector from the agenda. At all levels, Ukraine’s distancing from Russia and organizations where Moscow played a leading role (such as the CIS, CSTO, or the Eurasian Union) was clear. The large-scale military aggression against Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, left Ukrainians with



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no choice – Ukrainian resistance became decisive in the formation of a new, consolidated identity of Ukrainian society. From the first days of the liberation struggle, Ukraine was open about its desire to be integrated into the European Union, and was able to enlist sufficient support to receive the status of a candidate for membership. The Ukrainian government has also applied for membership in NATO, a move which supported by a record number of Ukrainians. The Ukrainian authorities have set a course for rapidly reforming the country in order to integrate into Western institutions as soon as possible. While Russia's aggression was previously perceived to a certain extent as a local conflict, its global nature has now become obvious – authoritarianism vs. democracy; barbarism vs. civilization; ideas of "Eurasianism" vs. Western values. Ukraine has found itself at the epicenter of this confrontation and has unambiguously taken the side of democracy, civilization, and Westernization.

## PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR WESTERNIZATION

In 2008, Ukraine's leadership announced the country's desire to obtain a NATO Membership Action Plan. At the time, one of the main reasons for the Alliance's refusal was the argument that Ukrainian society did not sufficiently support such a decision. The then-Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, who was the main opponent of Ukrainian Euro-Atlantic integration, stated: "A country should become a member of NATO not only when its temporary political leadership is in favor of it, but when a significant part of the population supports that membership."

The problem was that until 2008, Ukrainian support for accession to NATO was never greater than 30%.<sup>204</sup> Large-scale anti-Western propaganda, much of which was financed by pro-Russian political forces in Ukraine, rejected Euro-Atlantic development, as did many Ukrainians, who felt that their country needed some kind of middle

path that would allow peaceful coexistence with both the West and Russia. Things began to follow Russia's occupation of a part of Ukrainian territory in early 2014, and pro-NATO sentiments began to grow stronger.<sup>205</sup> Following the large-scale Russian invasion in 2022, support for the Euro-Atlantic vector in Ukraine soared to 83% (the share of citizens ready to vote in a referendum on joining the Alliance).<sup>206</sup> The topic of joining NATO has become a unifying issue for Ukraine: even in the southern and eastern regions, which were traditionally considered pro-Russian, support for NATO is very high (at 69% in the eastern regions, and 81% in the southern regions).<sup>207</sup>

EU integration has always enjoyed tremendous support by Ukrainians, but that figure reached a record high of almost 80% in the face of the war. Thus, the Western shift in Ukraine's development has become a decisive issue for society. It seems that Russia has inadvertently turned Ukrainians from a skeptical society seeking to strike a balance into a consolidated nation rallied around a pro-Western foreign policy.

Sociologists, however, note that in times of war, we must consider new realities that can have an impact on several indicators. Firstly, the surveys being conducted right now cover only the part of citizens who are located in the territories controlled by Ukraine (almost 20% of the country's territory is currently occupied by Russia). However, polls confirm that respondents in the non-occupied parts of regions, which were previously considered pro-Russian, now show an unequivocal pro-Western sentiment. Secondly, the fact that millions of Ukrainians have escaped to other countries to dodge hostilities can also influence further Westernization: they learn the languages of the EU member states; they adopt the experience, values, and characteristics of democratic societies. In total, about 8 million Ukrainian refugees were registered all over Europe: 1.5 million in Poland, 1 million in Germany, 0.5 million in the Czech Republic, 167,000 in Italy, 160,000 in Spain, 119,000 in France, etc.<sup>208</sup>

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## POLITICAL CONSOLIDATION: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Consolidation affected not only the public, but also the political class. In previous years, the issue of integration into the EU and NATO has never found support among the majority of political players. There have always been political projects that occasionally presented significant opposition to the pro-Western movement. Now, most pro-Russian figures have fled Ukraine, and many have been charged with high treason (Viktor Medvedchuk, Viktor Yanukovich, and others).

**President Volodymyr Zelensky, who for the first year of his presidency avoided any explicit foreign policy declarations (especially regarding NATO), is today driving the pro-Western shift. His persistent efforts are forcing the cumbersome bureaucracies of the EU and NATO to respond more efficiently to Kyiv's official requests. In June 2021, Ukraine received the status of a candidate for EU membership – a little more than three months passed from sending the application to this decision.**

Usually, this process takes at least a year and, in some cases, several years (for example, Bosnia and Herzegovina only achieved candidacy at the end of 2022, although it applied in 2016).<sup>209</sup>

The President's completely pro-Western trajectory is supported by both Parliament and the Ukrainian government. There were precedents in Ukrainian history when the president's pro-Western aspirations did not matter much and in fact, they were often blocked by other branches of power (for example, during the presidency of Viktor Yushchenko). Now, one of the key opposition forces, European Solidarity, led by former President Petro Poroshenko, is a strong supporter of Zelensky's Euro-Atlantic efforts.

It is important that Ukraine not only declares adherence to the Western path, but also assumes its corresponding responsibilities by reforming various areas of Ukrainian life. The European Union, when deciding to grant candidate status to Ukraine in June 2022, also asked Kyiv officials to implement recommendations to reform seven different areas (ranging from the usual judicial reform and anti-corruption efforts to the matter of protecting national minorities and regulating mass media).

One essential feature of the reform processes in Ukraine is control by the influential non-governmental sector, which also greatly distinguishes the country from most former Soviet republics and illustrates its preference for the Western governmental model, in which authorities are held accountable to civil society. Thus, independent monitoring of the implementation of reforms, known as "Candidate Check," shows a rather high pace and scale of transformations underway thanks to European integration.<sup>210</sup> Ukraine was able to prepare and adopt two laws within a short timeframe - the one related to the mass media, and the second on national minorities. Ukrainian efforts in judicial reform were assessed positively (particularly with regard to the issue of resuming the work of the Supreme Council of Justice). Activities aimed at combating corruption also received good marks – the high-level activity of investigating so-called top-level corruption: for

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example, several high-level officials were suspected of corrupt activities, including several deputies and a deputy minister.

Nonetheless, Kyiv does not demonstrate a high standard of effective policy in every area. Thus, Western institutions expressed serious concerns about reforming the selection procedure for judges of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine. Ukrainian civil society demanded amendments to a previously approved law, which did not take into account the recommendations of the Venice Commission (this was the EU's main requirement). Ukraine's further progress toward EU membership depends on implementing these reforms, and Kyiv aims to start EU accession negotiations by the end of 2023.

Despite the fact that Ukraine's course towards the EU has had "mixed" and somewhat ambiguous results, there is reason to believe that this time, European integration will not be merely empty words. The authorities listen to public opinion, and promptly respond to criticisms from EU institutions, in an attempt to pass the necessary legislation in a short amount of time. It is doubtful that this will lead to EU membership in the very near future, as neither the EU nor Ukraine are ready for this. The EU insists that before a new wave of enlargement, it must carry out its own decision-making reforms. At the same time, Ukraine faces the challenge of undertaking these unprecedented efforts.

The matter of joining NATO looks less rosy. Most Allied countries still believe that any move in this regard could lead to further escalation with Russia, while Allied countries are trying to avoid being directly drawn into a war with Moscow. On a practical level, however, Ukraine could be seen as a sort of unofficial NATO member: the military sup-

port given to Ukrainians is unprecedented in many ways. The government is moving at a fairly rapid pace to achieve NATO standards in many matters. Meanwhile, in recent years, Ukrainians who support the Alliance have advocated for the idea of NATO membership, which should not necessarily lead to the abandonment of Soviet-designed weapons standards. In the midst of the war, the Ukrainian military's arsenal was replenished with systems adopted by NATO countries. In 2022, Ukraine was ranked second in the world in terms of the number of modern foreign-made anti-tank weapons, and artillery weapons were replaced with NATO 155 and 105 mm caliber models.<sup>211</sup>

This intensive reform, as well as the successful resistance on the battlefield in 2022, proved Ukraine's institutional effectiveness and resilience. During this military campaign, Russia has attempted to portray Ukraine not just as a hostile party, but also as a failed state, led by mercantile, corrupt officials. To some extent, it was Russian aggression itself that drove Ukraine to strengthen its resistance at various levels, both on the battlefield and in terms of reforms and foreign policy. The war also forced Western institutions to reconsider their approaches to Kyiv. Ukraine, which had always remained on the periphery of the Western governments' attention, has become one of their most critical strategic priorities. At the same time, Kyiv often presents itself not as a beggar or victim, but as an active party demanding fast and qualitatively new approaches. Russia managed to achieve things that even the most avid "Westernizers" in Ukraine were not able to do – Ukrainian citizens no longer see themselves as outside the Euro-Atlantic space; rather, under the pressure of existential challenges, Ukraine has in many ways, already become part of the Western world.

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# UZBEKISTAN:

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## The New 2022-2026 Development Strategy is Showing its First Results

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**Dr. Farkhod Tolipov**

ON DEMOCRATIC PURPOSES

In January 2022, Uzbekistan adopted its new 2022-2026 Development Strategy, replacing the previous 2017-2021 Development Strategy.<sup>212</sup>

The document consists of 100 articles, which are called 'purposes', and is comprehensive in terms of covering all spheres of political, economic, social, cultural life of the people and the state. As such, it is undoubtedly a progressive and democratically-oriented major statement of purposes, though many parts are somewhat analytical in nature.

The text of Strategy begins with the article/purpose devoted to the makhalla – self-ruling local communities, which is interesting message per se, since by definition and by design, a makhalla is considered the building block of society and root of democracy. At the same time, the makhalla has long been a bastion of the most archaic and conservative conditions of the Uzbek people. Modernizing and democratizing the makhalla will prove a very difficult task.

The second purpose highlights reforms of provincial and city-level Councils – local legislative elected bod-



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ies. It envisages strengthening the capacity of Councils in controlling local executive power branches and increasing their responsibility for the socio-economic development of their area. Additionally, the third purpose sounds somewhat revolutionary because it implies the “creation of conditions” for the formation of executive branches of power in provinces, cities, and districts on the basis of democratic principles, including the creation of legal conditions for the introduction of election of khokims – local governors.

We should not lose sight of the fact that the democratic principle of separation of powers is weakest on the provincial level. Khokims are simultaneously provincial governors or chiefs of executive power branches and also the chairmen of Councils. Unfortunately, the Development Strategy does not mention any popular election of khokims until 2026, and postpones any innovation here indefinitely.

Purpose 7 aims to increase the role of Oliy Majlis (Uzbekistan’s Parliament) and political parties as a continuation of current reforms. In particular, the idea is to develop an “electronic Parliament” and digitalize its activity in order to activate and improve communication between the Parliament and citizens. The purpose is also to reform the electoral system by taking lessons learned from the global democratic experience. Meanwhile, this does not reflect the Oliy Majlis’s current practices. For example, in December 2022, one very popular, independent, and critical Deputy decided to resign from Parliament because he was disappointed with its non-democratic practice.

Purpose 11 addresses the efficient organization of the Public Chamber – a special informal structure under the President which is designed to serve as a mechanism of direct communication between President and civil society. The purpose describes active engagement with civil society institutions in identifying solutions for problems of public concern. However, it is worth noting that while the creation of the Public Chamber was announced several years ago, it has not yet begun to operate effectively. Additionally, in the chapter on justice and the rule of law, purpose 20 mentions “developing an active civil society through increasing the population’s legal culture and legal literacy, arranging

efficient interactions between government bodies and civil society institutions, mass media, and educational institutions”. This task sounds quite strange and at the same time ambiguous and academic in nature, given that it has been a mantra repeated for over 30 years of independence. The fact that it is constantly repeated reflects the lack of progress here.

## ON ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Purpose 29 is about reducing government participation in the economy and expanding conditions to develop the private sector and introduce the principles of a free market economy. It is envisaged that the tax burden on businesses will be reduced from 27.5% to 25% of the GDP by 2026. Certainly, the private sector is one indicator of the market economy, but its development should be transparent and free from biases, which can sometimes be a challenge when it comes to privatization.

Purpose 46 lists the goal of reaching 50% coverage with higher education. In particular, public higher education institutions will be provided with more academic freedom and financial autonomy. This is really an ambitious decision that may lead to breakthrough in the higher education system.

Additionally, purpose 49 sets a target of reaching no less than 50 private higher education institutions by 2026. Moreover, 10 Uzbek universities may be ready to be included in the international QS and THE rating systems by 2026.

Significant reform and progressive achievements are expected in the area of higher education, in line with purpose 50, as the scope of “free and creative thinking youth” expected to study in prestigious foreign universities via the “El-Yurt Umidi” Foundation channels will double; of these students, 50% will be studying natural sciences, technical specialties, and IT.

## ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Purpose 94 points out to the necessity of closer high-level cooperation among Central Asian countries

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on trade-economic, security, water, energy, transport, and cultural-humanitarian matters. This purpose also addresses the need to support cooperation between Uzbekistan and European countries and European Union institutions in the same areas (trade-economic, water-energy, transport, and cultural-humanitarian).

Article 95 is about further developing Uzbekistan's relations with traditional partners, and prioritizing the geographical expansion of foreign ties while strengthening economic diplomacy. Practically speaking, this means broader interaction with European countries through high-level visits; strengthening strategic partnership with the US, Canada, and countries in the Americas; and boosting cooperation with business circles in the United States in the area of investments, exports, and advanced technologies.

**In December 2022, the so-called Strategic Partnership Dialogue – a new diplomatic platform – took place in Washington, DC, where representatives of Uzbekistan and the United States discussed the outlook for strategic partnership between their countries. It is worth noting, however, that the 2022-2026 Development Strategy makes no mention of developing a strategic partnership when it comes to Uzbekistan's cooperation with Russia.**

Purpose 96 discusses strengthening Uzbekistan's activity in institutions and bodies of the United Nations as well as global economic, financial, and humanitarian organizations. In particular, Uzbekistan will continue cooperation with all partners in promoting the UN Secretary General's "Calls to actions for human rights".

However, despite Uzbekistan's constant declarations that it adheres to UN principles and resolutions and calls for the UN to play a stronger role when it comes to international peace, security, and development, in practice it refrains from a more decisive or principled position when voting at the UN on Russia's aggression against Ukraine (Uzbekistan did not attend voting).

Purpose 97 addresses both upcoming membership in the WTO and deepening integration processes with the Euro-Asian Economic Union (EAEU). It is quite controversial that these two different, and in some instances, incompatible, goals are combined in one purpose. This provision envisages: negotiations with WTO member-states; increasing the capacity of Uzbekistan's WTO and multilateral trade system specialists; working out corresponding suggestions on bringing national legislation on technical regulations, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, and intellectual property protections in line with the requirements of WTO agreements; and assessing the influence of Uzbekistan's WTO membership on the national economy.

At the same time, the purpose also indicates the need to "improve national policy on issues of technical regulation and standardization for effective entrance in the Eurasian Economic Union based on the Union's experience; conduct deep analysis of the Treaty on Euro-Asian Economic Union and working out the relevant suggestions; and study EAEU trade policy, which is priority over the national policy as well as agreements with third parties.

This provision of the Development Strategy contains a controversial vision of a strategic perspective of Uzbekistan. The EAEU is not an organization of equals – Russia's dominance and hegemony is evident. It is also both explicitly and implicitly geopo-

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litical in nature. Kazakh experts, for example, have already criticized the EAEU and suggested that Kazakhstan may withdraw from it.

Since 2019, discourse on Uzbekistan's potential EAEU membership has been unfolding in a way that might contradict WTO membership, and Tashkent will have to decide where its priorities lie.

Purpose 98 states that the purpose is enhancing efficiency in delivering information about Uzbekistan is aimed at improving the country's image in the international community. More specifically, Uzbekistan plans on "conducting regular negotiations with the representatives of politico-diplomatic, trade-economic, business, cultural-humanitarian and analytical circles of European countries, providing them with objective information on comprehensive reforms implemented in Uzbekistan".

## ONE YEAR LATER

One year has passed since the new Development Strategy was adopted. Some preliminary positive results in the implementation of this Strategy can already be seen, such as: 1) Administrative reform accelerated by the end of the 2022. The number of ministries was reduced from 25 to 21. The size of administrative personnel in the executive power branches was reduced by 30%. 2) The new practice of "Open Dialogue" between the President and entrepreneurs was created, allowing businesspeople to discuss the issues they are facing with the President. 3) New private universities were created and the level of academic freedom has improved. 4) US-Uzbekistan Strategic Dialogue frameworks were activated. 5) EU-Uzbekistan cooperation also received significant impetus, in particular due to the GSP+ system. 6) The overall dynamics of

regional cooperation in Central Asia have been fostered and developed.

Meanwhile, rapid, expanded cooperation and strategic partnership between Uzbekistan and the West has been a major factor in achieving success and increasing the Development Strategy's efficiency. Moving Tashkent's foreign policy in this direction has added value in itself, but can also be seen as a strategic course on balancing geopolitical burden, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine and Moscow's growing pressure on Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries.

By and large, the 2022-2026 Development Strategy is ambitious and progressive. However, there are currently numerous observable examples of democratic reversals, which contrast with the document.. In addition to crises in Parliament's activity and in the party system, there is geopolitical pressure from Russia, and non-democratic practices in state governance persist. Overall, this strategically limits the freedom of choice in Uzbekistan and hampers the Strategy's accomplishment. Much will depend on numerous factors, such as President's readiness and will to democratize the political system and overcome conservative forces which exist among the political elites.

In his December 2022 address to Parliament and to the people, Uzbekistan's President expressed resentment over the regime of "manual control" in state governance, reflecting the inefficiency of the entire political system in which individuals, governors or the President determine policy, rather than institutions, rules, and people's engagement This resentment means that it will be hard to successfully realize the new Development Strategy as long as these multiple barriers remain in place.

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## **WESTERNIZATION**

Westernization is a process whereby societies adopt Western standards for cultural norms and codes of conduct, such as individual freedom, liberal democratic governance, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, rule of law, secularism, and protection of private property in areas such as industry, technology, law, politics, economics, and lifestyle.

In the last few centuries, Westernization has served as a catalytic influence in the acceleration of global growth in equatable ways as with modernization.

Rather than reflective of a single society's values, however, Westernization is more than a unidirectional influence of one country over another. Over time, the process of Westernization can produce a two-sided exchange. As a country becomes more Western, it, in turn, can also produce reciprocal influence on countries in which Western ideas originated.